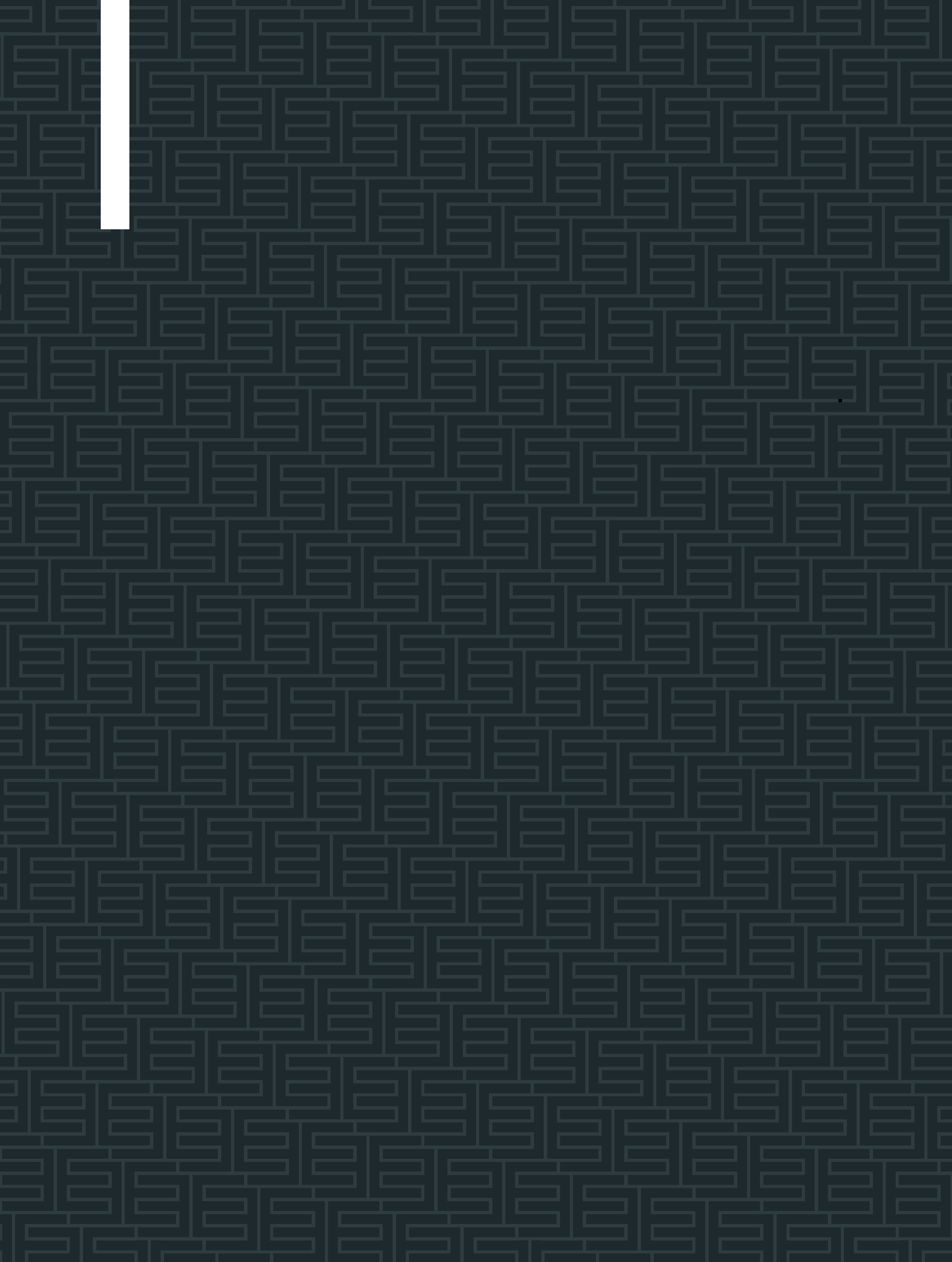


THE 100 BEST GAMES OF E3 2018
EDGE®
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
CONTROL
GHOST OF TSUSHIMA
TETRIS EFFECT
DEATH STRANDING
FALLOUT 76
ANTHEM
THE ELDER SCROLLS VI
HALO INFINITE
DEVIL MAY CRY 5
RAGE 2
GEARS 5
HITMAN 2
SUPER SMASH BROS ULTIMATE
ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY
THE LAST OF US PART II
DOOM ETERNAL
SUPER MARIO PARTY
FORZA HORIZON 4
SPIDER-MAN
隻狼
SEKIRO
SHADOWS DIE TWICE
HOW THE CREATOR OF DARK SOULS IS REDEFINING THE ACTION GAME IN HIS MOST PUNISHING WORK TO DATE
CYBERPUNK 2077
THE WITCHER III TEAM KICKS OFF THE NEXT GENERATION
#322
SEPTEMBER 2018



What the hell am I doing drinking in LA at 24?

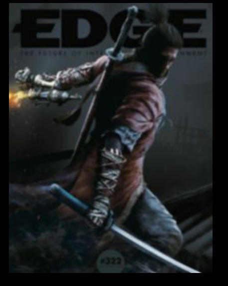
E3 used to be a jolly. You arrived two days before things got interesting, with a whole day off to bimble around Santa Monica, walking, shopping or drinking off your hangover. Then you had four press conferences in a day, then a few days wandering the halls of the LA Convention Center, interspersed with nice dinners and late nights. Then three weeks to get over the jetlag, dry out, eat things that aren't beige, and write it all up.

We still have the last bit, at least. It's just as well, given how much E3 has stretched out: by the time we arrived in Los Angeles this year, EA Play was already in full swing, and we were lining up for the Xbox conference 18 hours later. It's hectic stuff, and we appreciate, and make the most of, the long lead time. We don't have to write up our thoughts on a game within minutes of seeing it; we can take our time, let things percolate, assess games not just on their individual merits but in a wider context, too.

And we can do more. In the pages that follow you'll find run-downs on 100 titles from the greatest show on gaming Earth. It's felt a bit much at times, if we're honest. But if you're going to fly halfway round the world to spend a week playing videogames, you might as well make the most of it.

E3 is always fascinating, and this year's was no exception – though it perhaps lacked a little of the pizzazz of recent years. There were no big shocks, no new consoles to focus on. There was a lot of sequels, and the show-floor buzz was largely centred on games we already knew about.

Well, with one exception. We'd heard whispers of Activision working with FromSoftware, but didn't dare lend them much credence. The *Call Of Duty* company writing cheques for the makers of *Dark Souls*? Surely not. Yet *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* is very much real, and very much brilliant. It's also, despite what the publisher's involvement might imply, very much a FromSoft game. You think Miyazaki's going to make an easier game? Not a bit of it. In fact, from what we've seen, he appears to be going in completely the other direction. Our story begins on p82.



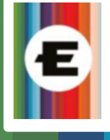
Exclusive subscriber edition







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Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content



Subscribe to **Edge** and get a free *Zelda*-themed Switch controller – see p92 for details



#322

sections

SEPTEMBER 2018



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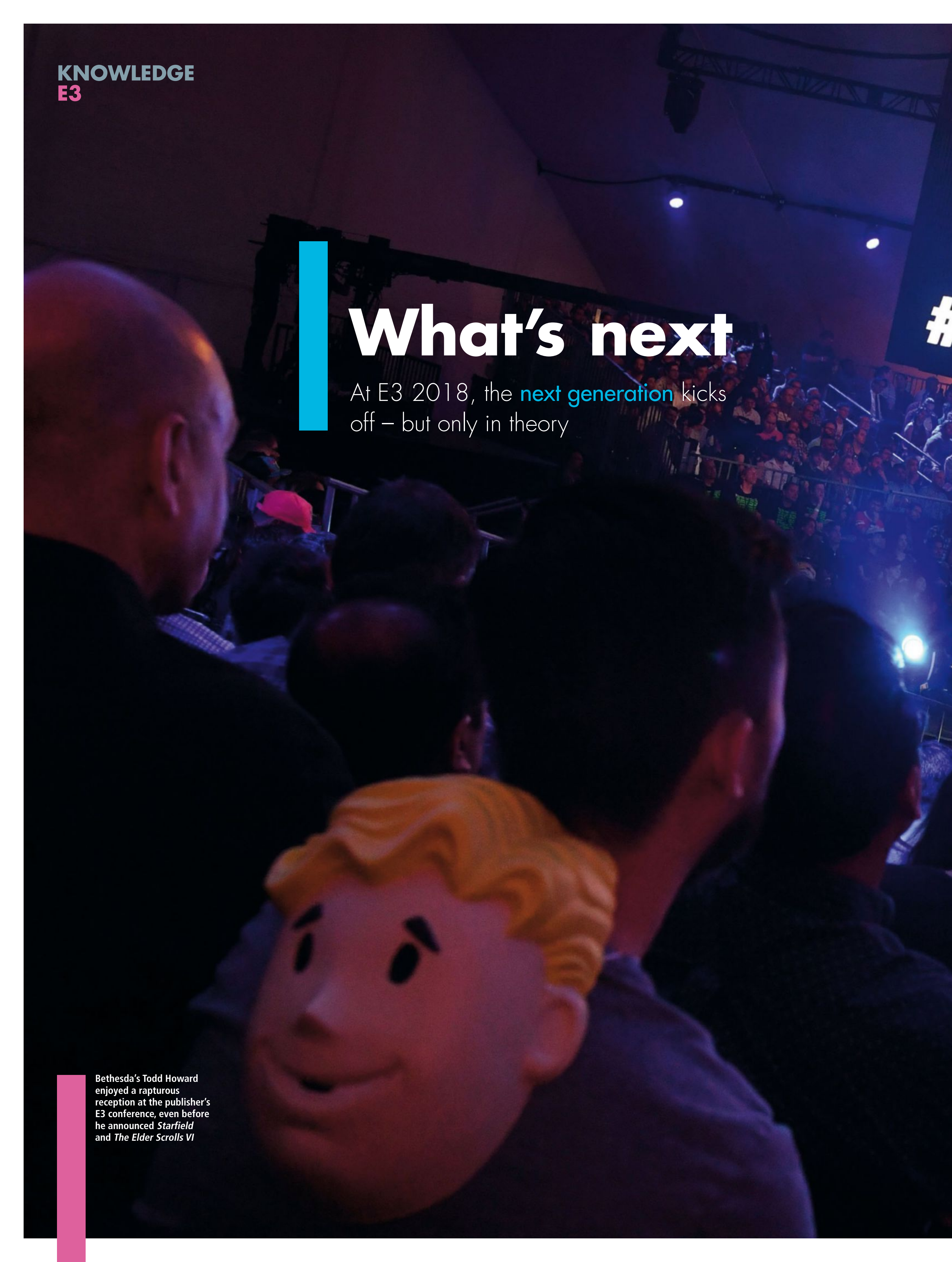
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What's next

At E3 2018, the next generation kicks off – but only in theory

Bethesda's Todd Howard enjoyed a rapturous reception at the publisher's E3 conference, even before he announced *Starfield* and *The Elder Scrolls VI*


BE3

We are still outside in the sweltering Los Angeles sunshine when the news starts coming in. Microsoft has changed the venue for its conference this year. Its new digs are much more favourably located – the newly rebadged Microsoft Theatre, nestled next to the Staples Centre just round the corner from E3 itself, was Nintendo's home until it ditched the press-conference format a few years ago. It's a move that makes a lot of sense, not least because it gives Microsoft a colossal space on E3's doorstep in which to host the Xbox Fanfest, as well as press demos. Yet the change hasn't run too smoothly. Inside, Phil Spencer is paying smug tribute to the largest audience to ever attend an Xbox conference. No, old chap, we're stuck outside, along with a few hundred others. Well, we were. **Edge** has given up, and gone to the pub.

That's unfortunate, because even viewed on an iPad screen in a bar with choppy WiFi and a noisy Hall & Oates soundtrack, this was Microsoft's best E3 showing of the Xbox One era, the inevitable caveats notwithstanding. It had everything we could reasonably ask for from an E3 conference: new firstparty announcements, leftfield surprises, some big thirdparty trailers, platform announcements and a hint of what's over the horizon.

The Xbox operation has grown progressively slicker in the Spencer era, and this was perhaps its apex. Confident after the success of Xbox One X yet still far enough behind in the sales race to need to come out swinging, this was a conference that reflected the steady, ongoing improvement in Microsoft's console operation. New *Halo*, *Gears* and *Forza* games were the baseline requirement, but even here Microsoft found room to surprise. *Halo Infinite*, powered by 343 Industries' new Slipspace engine, meant the show opened with a peek at Xbox's next generation. *Forza Horizon 4* is set in rural England, has a novel weekly structure, and will be the first game in the series to run at 60fps on Xbox One X. And *Gears*? Not only will the protagonist be female for the first time in series history, but the franchise is spreading to other platforms and genres.

Microsoft's increasingly elastic definition of exclusivity continues to befuddle

Sadly, it is here that the caveats must begin. *Gears Pop*, a mobile game of as-yet-unspecified genre based on the Funko Pop toy line, is a marketing department's wet dream, and, well, let's leave it there out of politeness. Our expectations of PC strategy game *Gears Tactics* are roughly equivalent to our expectations two years ago of *Halo Wars 2*. Look beyond the headlines, apply a little context, and Microsoft's strong showing starts to look a little shaky.

We thought we'd consigned to the dustbin of history the notion of blazered executives announcing new business initiatives being an acceptable part of an E3 conference. Okay, Spencer might have stopped short of busting out the bar charts – just as well, given the sales figures – but acquisitions are the stuff of press releases, not stage shows. Especially when one of them just put out *State Of Decay 2*. Similarly, news of The Initiative, a new studio in Santa Monica perfectly placed to hoover up SIE and Naughty Dog burnouts, felt distinctly out of place. The message was clear: we may not have much this year. But look, we wrote some cheques, and in three years or so things will change. We'll have *State Of Decay 3*, for one.

And as surprising as some of those thirdparty trailers were – we still can't quite believe Microsoft got *Sekiro* – the company did over-egg things a bit. "World Premiere," boomed the voiceover at the start of a trailer for *Tales Of Vesperia: Definitive Edition*, a multiformat tart-up of a decade-old game. "Exclusive," it thundered about the Xbox version of *Black Desert*, which launched on PC in 2015. Microsoft's increasingly elastic definition of exclusivity continues to befuddle. When even your firstparty games are headed to PC, perhaps it's time to put the word in a drawer for a bit before things get embarrassing. You know, like *Crackdown 3*.

Still, this really was the best Xbox conference in years, and flattered even more by the dreck served up by rival platform holders in the following days. The less said about Nintendo's 'effort' the better, though in fairness you can only play the hand you're dealt, and with *Mario* and *Zelda* having arrived in Switch's first year 2018 was always going to be a struggle. It might not be for us, but *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* will sell by the bucketload. And perhaps we'll appreciate Masahiro Sakurai's 20-minute walkthrough of the game's every system when launch day arrives and we can safely skip the tutorial.

Weeks later, though, we are still trying to work out what Sony thought it was playing at. The logical explanation for this barebones offering is that Sony has already played its hand for this generation. The platform holder likes to publish two big games a year, one in the *Horizon* slot and another around Christmas. By focusing its attention almost exclusively on *Death Stranding*, *The Last Of Us Part II*, *Spider-Man* and *Ghost Of Tsushima* – and with the likes of *Days Gone* and *Dreams* presumably not trusted to take one of the headline release slots – Sony was effectively admitting that PS4 has two years left to run.

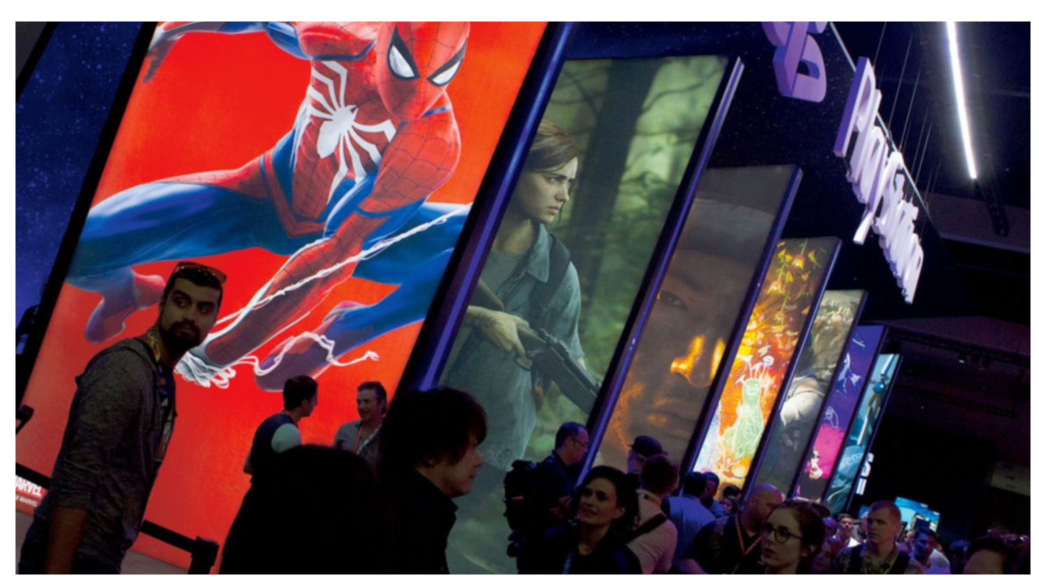
Yet that still does not excuse it. There have been Sony conferences in the PS4 era that will be remembered and talked about for years, for the moments that remind you why E3 is still so anticipated and celebrated despite how much the industry has changed. But in doing so Sony punched itself out, and this is all that remains. An attempt at lavish set dressing – with areas themed around the games being shown off – irritated both those watching at home (thanks to the delays ▶

For once Phil Spencer's confidence felt justified. He also spoke of Microsoft's research into gaming AI, and confirmed work had begun on new hardware



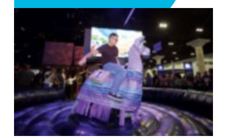


The show floor teemed again, but organisers had a better handle on how to manage industry and public at once. Over time we expect to see the final day be attended exclusively by fans



PUBLIC EYE

E3 is evolving into something a lot more commercial than before



As E3 transforms from a trade show to a public one, so the show adapts in kind. There's a lot more merch on sale now, for instance, and there's also a gently increased focus on games that are already on sale. Frontier's *Jurassic World: Evolution* booth was one of the most eye-catching of the show, set in shipping containers surrounded by a high fence and raptor statues. The most consistently popular attraction was, naturally, *Fortnite*, easily picked out despite its corner location by the disco ball looming above it. The game of the hour also hosted the largest party of the year, with bigtime rappers, themed drinks and – a sure sign of a hot E3 ticket – free burgers from revered California chain In-N-Out.

STAY POSITIVE
Unlike previous E3s, this year's show largely passed off without scandal. There were no major interview gaffes or fanboy flame bait – though much of this was down to a general lack of interview opportunities, with execs finally cottoning on to the fact that if you don't talk to anyone, then you can't say anything wrong. Joseph Gordon-Levitt's involvement in a poorly communicated crowdsourcing campaign to find artists for *Beyond Good & Evil 2* was about as close as we got to a true furore, along, inevitably, with *Fortnite*. An insta-release for Switch during Nintendo's E3 broadcast was rapturously received for as long as it took people to notice that if they'd ever played the game on PS4, their account was locked on other platforms. The cross-play debate is, in fairness, hardly an E3 exclusive.

in shuttling people between sets) and there in person (there was no seating in the first arena). Weirdly, only the first two games had themed rooms, with everything else playing out in the *Ghost Of Tsushima* area. Perhaps it was abandoned when someone finally realised that the videogame press are not exactly speedy movers, and the event was in danger of badly overrunning. Unlike Microsoft, they at least had the good grace to let everyone in first.

E3 is no longer just about the platform holders, of course. Elsewhere, Ubisoft produced another of its slick, busy conferences, reprising last year's *Mario + Rabbids* shock with news of a *Star Fox* crossover in *Starlink: Battle For Atlas* (sorry for the lack of that in **E**321's cover story, but Nintendo holds its secrets close). That gave us a second chapter in gaming's sweetest emerging bromance, as Ubi CEO Yves Guillemot presented Shigeru Miyamoto with a prototype of Fox McCloud's *Starlink* ship. Everything else ran largely as expected; Ubisoft is in an easy annual rhythm these days, and in the absence of the traditional closing mic-drop this was, Guillamoto aside, a quietly efficient year for the publisher.

EA, meanwhile, continues to do its own thing in Hollywood, and feels progressively more isolated from E3 as EA Play matures. Unless you're the poor soul who had to head straight from the airport on Saturday to a *Battlefield V* capture session, we suppose. With its *Battlefield* hand already played, there was little of note here, which at least meant things went off less embarrassingly than usual – an awkward interview with a somehow, err, relaxed Respawn boss Vince Zampella was about as bad as it got.

Bethesda, however, blew the doors off. While just about everyone else was keeping its next-gen cards to its chest, here we had Todd Howard detailing not just Bethesda Game Studios' next project, but the one after, and the one after that. The thinking was clear, and later confessed to: with *Fallout 76* an online game and *The Elder Scrolls: Blades* a mobile RPG, Bethesda wanted to reassure its audience that it hadn't abandoned its signature singleplayer RPGs. We suspect that Todd Howard's distaste for the promotional circuit may have had something to do with it, too ('Fine, I'll do it. But I'm not getting up there again for ten years'). Both *Starfield* and *The Elder Scrolls VI* are clearly next-gen games, and the latter in particular is years off. The reaction was cataclysmic, and deservedly so.

The same can't be said for Andrew WK, whose typically enthusiastic stage performance was never going to go down well with several hundred already-exhausted journalists in an auditorium whose seats were too close together. Yet he's the perfect signing for *Rage 2*, an outlandish, lightning-paced shooter made by Id and Avalanche, a meeting of minds that's a match made in heaven for this sort of game.

Yet perhaps the most telling announcement of Bethesda's show was *Doom Eternal* – a game whose title, along with *Halo Infinite*, hints at the trajectory games are taking. With the generation winding down, publishers and platform holders have clearly been taking stock. In terms of quality, this has been one of gaming's great eras, but much has gone wrong, and there is plenty to be learned from. Loot boxes are dead, of course, but there's more to it than that. What can the industry take from redemption stories such as *DriveClub* and *The Division*, failed sequels such as *Battlefront II* and *Destiny 2*, and the lauded, beloved, but quickly forgotten likes of *Uncharted 4*, *Doom* and *Prey*?

The phrase 'game as service' has already had its day. It was never elegant and will now forever be associated with loot boxes. In its place? Well, perhaps it's just a question of videogame subtitles having used up all the good nouns and moving on to the adjectives. But it's tempting to see a future where games just release and then exist – no messy reboots, no unwanted resets, just an upwards curve of steady expansion and improvement. Endless. Infinite. Sign us up.

After all that, somehow, there was a convention to go to. After last year's decision to open E3 to the public went so badly south, this year organisers restrained the movements of the hoi polloi. They were locked out on the first two mornings, letting those with professional interest in the show do their work in relative peace. Once their time came, crowdflow was more efficiently managed, with staggered entry to a show floor whose aisles felt a little wider. And much of the action was taken away from the hustle and bustle, with many publishers decamping to meeting rooms upstairs for press demos and interviews.

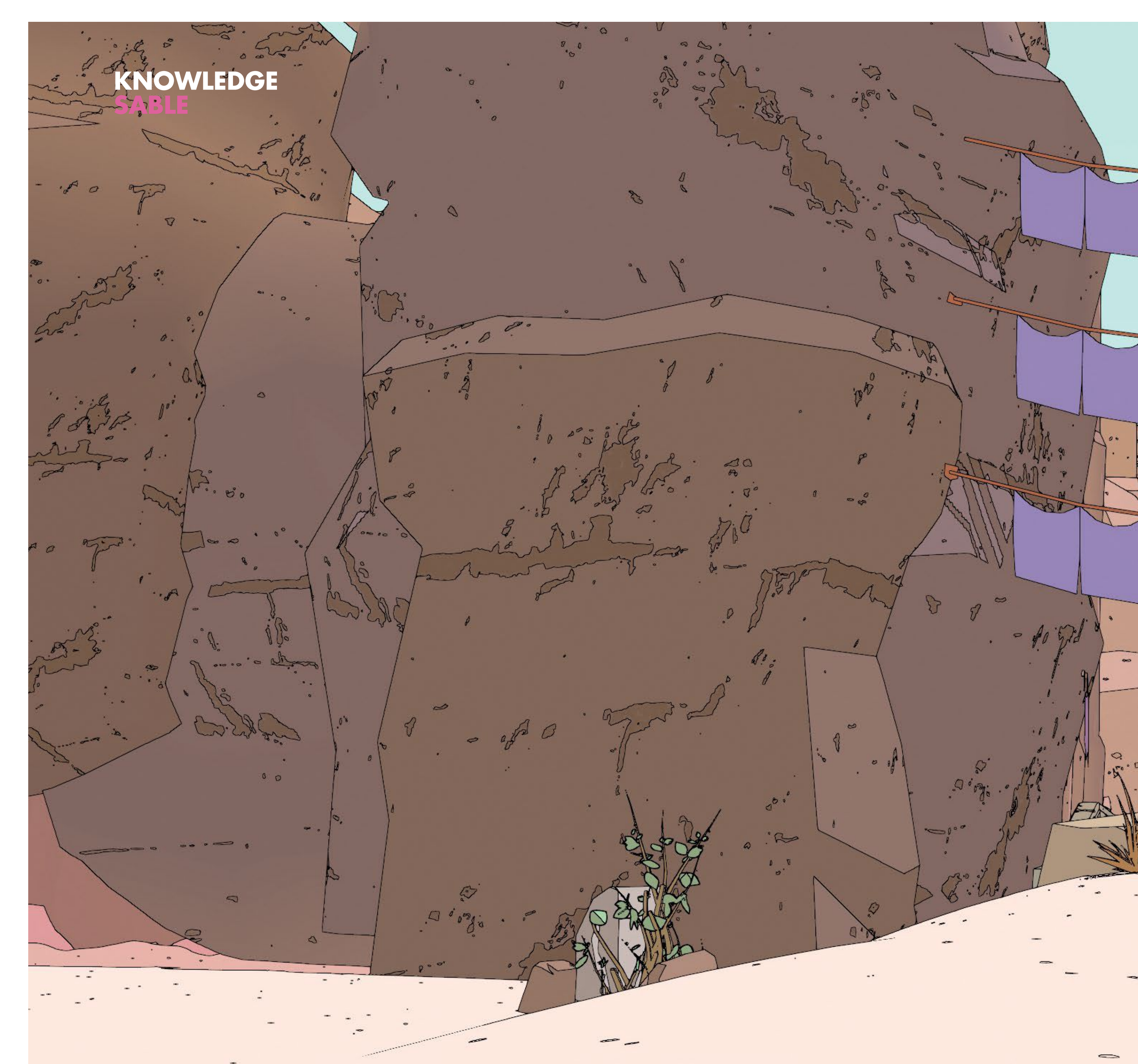
> The curtain is falling on a remarkable generation, but it has not quite reached the floor yet

Some have been up there for years, of course. CD Projekt Red was, as always, nestled quietly above the West Hall hubbub, yet talk of what it was showing off dominated the show. *Cyberpunk 2077* was ridiculous.

These little glimpses of the future just about saved this E3 from giving the perception of an industry treading water. This late in the generation, installed bases have grown to an extent where the risks don't feel too risky any more. Tech, developers' understanding of it and the processes they work with have matured and been refined. The E3-presser template – exclusive, indie sizzle reel, thirdparty blockbuster, rinse and repeat until mic drop – is set in well-worn stone. But things are about to change. Perhaps not next year at retail, but certainly at E3. The curtain is falling on a remarkable generation, but it has not quite reached the floor yet. We've still got *Gears Pop* to look forward to, after all. ■



CD Projekt Red says *Cyberpunk 2077* is in development for current consoles, but the game will be best served by more powerful hardware



COMIC SANDS

How Sable's stunning ligne claire style tells a story about striking out on one's own

Sable's influences are immediately evident: it's every inch a playable Moebius comic. "The flat colour style we're using was inspired by ligne claire comics, as well as the works of Moebius," **Greg Kythreotis**, one half of indie developer Shedworks, confirms. "It felt like pushing the style in that direction would be a good and unique fit. It also happens that a lot of his work is set in deserts and he was a big influence on Star Wars, which was also on our minds at the time."

You play as Sable, a girl leaving home for the first time astride her beloved hoverbike, off on a journey to explore ancient ruins and meet new people. "We're a small team, but we wanted to make a game that felt big and lonely," **Daniel Fineberg** says. "The environment's sparseness gives the game a slower, more contemplative pace." Indeed, there's a sense of unhurried curiosity as we clamber and glide through towering architecture inspired by Carlo Scarpa and Archigram. Returning to our hoverbike, meanwhile, feels like greeting an old friend. "A big part of that is allowing players to customise the bike they ride, and grow a personal attachment that way," Fineberg says.

With its visual touchstones so evident, we wonder how *Sable* will manage to clearly define its own identity. "With such a strong style you always have that thought in the back of your head," Kythreotis says. "But it is a very different medium, the stories we are telling are very different, and *Sable* will have its own unique flavour." We are keen to discover what lies beyond its beautiful horizons when *Sable* releases next year. ■



"One of the biggest challenges of working with flat colours is the lack of depth perception," Kythreotis says. "In outdoor environments we use colour gradients moving into the distance to create depth"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I'm working independently and **staying independent**. I'm not doing anything Star Wars. That project is on the shelf."

Amy Hennig confirms that not only was her EA Star Wars game cancelled – her contract was too



"I'm confident **we'll get to a solution** which will be accepted by our gaming community, while at the same time supporting our business."

SIEA president **Shawn Layden** confirms Sony is finally considering cross-play



"If it doesn't help the developer, and it doesn't help the consumer, then **it doesn't help grow gaming**. I wish people could get to play together."

Xbox boss **Phil Spencer** dreams of a brighter future. Shouldn't have bought the *State Of Decay* devs then, should you?

"Fill in the blank of your favourite franchise. We'll announce information close to its launch date versus **teasing people for years on end**."



So, NOA president **Reggie Fils-Aimé**, what's up with *Metroid Prime 4*?

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Tipsy Raccoons
Manufacturer Glitchbit

The burgeoning 'barcade' scene is, as the name implies, about transporting things you can play elsewhere to somewhere that sells booze. Some trade in nostalgia, with racks of classic games and consoles connected to dusty old CRTs. Others have a LAN-party vibe with network PCs running the latest multiplayer darling, or the latest consoles on which to play the latest couchplay hit. Companies are increasingly catering towards this young market – *Pac-Man's Pixel Bash*, for instance, is an official single-cab compilation of 31 Namco classics. True innovation, however, is thin on the ground.

Until now, that is. *Tipsy Raccoons* might not look like much, but there's much more to this pixel-art minigame compilation than screenshots might suggest. For one thing, its bespoke cabinet is tailor-made for the bar scene, thanks to an ingenious (and patent-pending) payment system. Each player (the cabinet caters to a maximum of six) has a joystick, action button and a round, recessed drink-holder. Insert a beverage – alcoholic or not, in a bottle, can or glass – and you're given a credit. As the game's title suggests, you'll be prompted to take a drink at certain times during the round. It's smashing stuff, and precisely the sort of thing the barcade scene needs right now. And yes, before you ask the obvious question, the control panel is fully water-resistant.

My Favourite Game
Paul Scheer

The SAG-winning actor on bad films, games, and the broken link between the two

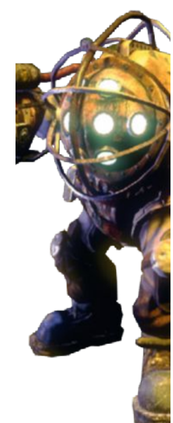
Paul Scheer is a comedian and actor who made his mark as a creator and star of the MTV sketch series Human Giant. Since then, he's starred in various TV shows such as The League, Fresh Off The Boat and Veep, and continues to host How Did This Get Made, a podcast (mostly) about bad films.

What gave you the idea to start How Did This Get Made?
My wife June and I had just seen Wall Street 2 and we went to a party after. We started talking to our friend Jason about it and we were finishing each other's sentences, laughing and talking, and he says, "Oh, this is a podcast". And it just plays into Jason, June and I sharing that we love movies. Even these movies that are not the best of the best, we love talking about them and we love the experience of seeing a movie together. I see that as a universal thing, that one of the best parts about going to the theatre is the talk you have afterwards.

You've done over 100 episodes now.
We've done over 100, but we've done them over such a long period of time – eight years. We don't do many, and I think that keeps it fresh, because we all have different careers: writers, directors, actors, we're all doing our stuff. It's still very much a hobby.

You're always asked to talk about bad films, but what films do you like most?
Honestly, I don't think I've ever been asked that question. If I was to really to cut it down from the top, it'd be the original Star Wars trilogy, Ghostbusters, Indiana Jones, and then these odd-man-out comedies, like Uncle Buck, Summer Rental and The Jerk. Oh, and Beverly Hills Cop! I love action comedies too, so it's a real assemblage of stuff.

STREET FIGHTING
Scheer's popular podcast has taken aim at some of the most infamous videogame adaptations, including *Super Mario Bros*, *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* – the latter of which he and his fellow co-hosts had trouble understanding. "I love that idea because that's not a thing, there's nothing called 'street fighting'. But in cinema, like Rocky V, Rocky goes back to the ring but has then got to go down to the docks? I love how a street fight is presented. I've seen fights break out in the subway and they're never graceful."




Are you frustrated with how bad film adaptations of videogames have been over the years?
I don't think there's ever been a good videogame movie adaptation, and very rarely do you see a good videogame based on a movie. There was a good *Spider-Man* game back in the day – it was really fun, I think it was around the first Tobey Maguire film.

But it's almost like there's a pipeline between the two that's broken on both ends. You can't make it good on either side. It's a bummer because there are so many movies I'd love to see games of, but they're often just rushed into existence. For videogame films, the one I have the most hope for (if it ever does happen) is *Uncharted*, because it's just Indiana Jones.

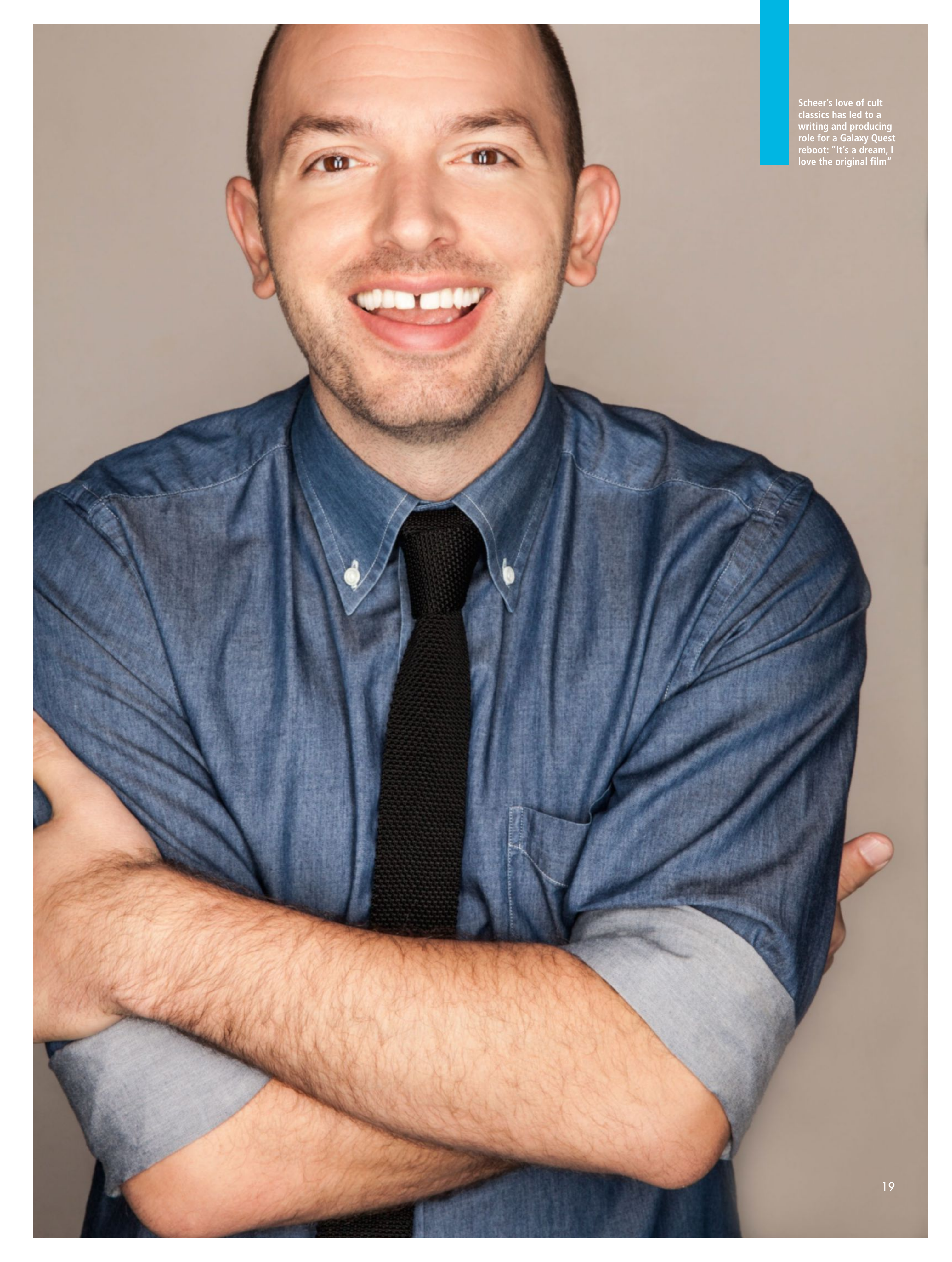
"I don't think there's ever been a good videogame movie adaptation"

Given the number of projects you're working on at any given point, which videogames do you have time to play?
I would say that if there's a scale of gamer, I'm on the small end of it, in that I have a full VR setup, I have my Xbox, I have a PlayStation, all of it – but I also have children, which is very demanding. So my gaming is limited. Would I like to be playing *Fortnite* more? Absolutely, it's just that I can't do it. So whenever I go on location, I either bring my Xbox or my PlayStation. I figure I'm away from my family, and I'll have this time to play. I've been doing a lot more VR lately, and *Star Trek: Bridge Crew* is exceptionally fun.

What do you like about games that you can't get from movies? What are the ones you're always going back to?
There's something about games in that they alternate on two different levels. You have a melodramatic style of gaming where it works great by playing in a dark room where everything is the most important decision. And then you have, conversely, on the other side the dumbest thing – like, get these golden rings and run away from the squirrel. And it's hard to find a middle ground.

I have a soft spot in my heart for *Star Wars: Battlefront*. It never gives me the gaming experience I quite want – the old versions are all I really want, just give me that again, just upgrade it – but I like it. And I'm a big *NBA 2K* guy, I'll buy that every year.

And your favourite game?
I do have a lot of fun playing the *Call Of Duty* games. But I think one of my favourite games I have ever played was the first *BioShock*. It's a beautiful game. It reminded me of my favourite games from before that which were all the LucasArts games, like *Maniac Mansion* and *Zak McKracken*. I felt like it was cool and atmospheric, like *Myst*. *BioShock* had all those elements. ■

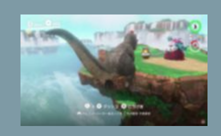


Scheer's love of cult classics has led to a writing and producing role for a Galaxy Quest reboot: "It's a dream, I love the original film"



BOARDGAME

When In Rome
bit.ly/voiceoriginals
The creator of Beasts Of Balance is back with another family-oriented blend of digital and tabletop game. When In Rome is the first in a new series of smart speaker-enabled Voice Originals: hosted by your Amazon Echo, it's a trivia game themed around travelling the world. After raising £3.2 million for the game via Kickstarter, Sensible Object worked with real people from the 20 locales featured, who ask you questions about their city. Available now, with DLC content already planned, it's a wonderfully social experience. While strong accents occasionally make certain words tricky to interpret, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks: we wish Alexa could patiently explain the rules of every tabletop game we introduce to drunken friends.



VIDEO

Shaving Seconds: Super Mario Odyssey
bit.ly/shavingsecs
Perhaps SGDQ 2018's *Super Mario Odyssey* speedrun inspired you to try some tricks out for yourself – in which case, we point you towards ScottFalco's 'Shaving Seconds' YouTube guide. Both informative and funny (when Falco isn't trying too hard), it offers quick explanations of running techniques, with more significant ones heralded by title cards. It's motivating to see how simple things such as the Dino skip are, while Falco's explanation of the wall-jump reset is essential for anyone looking to master movement in *Odyssey*, whatever their desired speed.

WEB GAME

Spaceport Babel
bit.ly/spaceportbabel
Airports are already a kind of alternate realm – places where people drive tiny cars indoors and it's acceptable to have a beer at nine in the morning. Finite Reflection's Train Jam 2018 entry takes the idea to its logical conclusion, casting you as a flustered human rushing around an alien terminal, reading strange symbols to puzzle out gates and catch your connecting flight. We're never quite able to: the gates change at the last second, and so off we scurry again as hypnotic chimes and unintelligible announcements ring out over the tannoy. It's designed to frustrate and disorient, but its polite queues of gaseous beings with reflective eyes and indigo-blue corridors accented with gentle neon make wandering about oddly peaceful – a feeling we can't say we've ever experienced in Heathrow.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

TV

Samsung Q9F
bit.ly/samsungq9f
Things didn't go so well for Samsung's TV line in 2017. The South Korean company slipped to third place in terms of market share, so the pressure was well and truly on for its 2018 models. The flagship Q9F is, we are happy to report, stunning. The difference is Full-Array Local Dimming, which offers far greater contrast than last year's edge-lit solution. It's the company's best TV yet for games, too; it now auto-switches to the low-latency Game Mode when you're playing a game, and knows to deactivate it if you're using your console to play video. Later this year, an update will auto-switch the display's refresh rate to match the framerate of the game being played to avoid tearing, like Nvidia's G-Sync. It's stunning stuff, all round, with one downside: prices start at £3,000. If that's within reach, though, it's worth every penny.



continue

Launch code
An in-game *Fortnite* event sees a rocket leave strange rifts in the sky

Culture hero
Overwatch's new Endorsements system rewards being nice

Fold throttle
A free update makes Nintendo Labo controllers *Mario Kart 8*-compatible

Hype score
SGDQ 2018 raises $2,122,249 for Doctors Without Borders

quit

Held to account
Got a PSN-linked Epic account? No playing *Fortnite* on Switch, then

Urban legend
Parody account @KazHiraiCEO (aka Mark Doherty) retires

Sheet outta luck
Labo contest prize is a cardboard-themed Switch. Please, *please* let us buy it

Hole hog
A mobile knock-off appears before *Donut County* even releases





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DISPATCHES SEPTEMBER



Issue 321

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Shock and aww

In light of Big Picture Mode last month (**E**321), I've been agonising over how to organise my thoughts on videogame shock factor. In this influencer-led marketing landscape, it's easy to use shock as social media clickbait. "Look at this genitalia cake!" is already the name of a few YouTube videos (probably). More than anything, it's unsurprising. I'm pretty certain that 'unsurprising' is not the reaction those publishers were going for. Has it always been this way?

I'm reminded of No Russian, the infamous *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* level, and the mass-media spotlight surrounding it. Coming from a behemoth franchise, this level capitalised on a shock and awe marketing tactic. It wasn't particularly notable for those who played the series – we were already accustomed to acts of virtual mass violence – but it was shocking to the audience it reached: those who did not play the game. (Before that, we had *Postal 2*, in which using a cat as a silencer on your shotgun was a share-worthy element. Was that transgressive at the time? I can't remember.)

"'Look at this genitalia cake!' is already the name of a few YouTube videos (probably)"

What stood out as truly shocking at this year's E3 wasn't an act of violence, but an act of affection instead. *The Last of Us: Part II*'s trailer sent ripples around the wrong side of Twitter, as certain unsavoury communities were up in arms that two ladies kissed. The SJWs were taking over, apparently, and videogames should stop with these 'cheap tricks'. Maybe Naughty Dog should have baked a cake in celebration of Pride month instead? That would really shock them.

Videogames: where (virtual) violence and (virtual) hate can make us roll our eyes, whilst love and affection cause uproar.
Conor Clarke

And we'd just about forgotten that stupid cake. For those of you asking, no, we're never naming the game it was promoting.

Serve and protect

For an E3 showcase, much of what was seen for the current consoles is interesting work. The generation has hit developer saturation where everyone is comfortable with the machines and is making strides with a lot of new ideas, releasing them at a steady clip. There has been, and will continue to be, a 'too many games' problem in the near future.

New console announcements and announcements for titles that are years away really didn't move me. What was really clear this year, however, is how important service and the perception of service is. Sony showed us back-to-back impressive trailers in *The Last of Us Part II* and *Ghost of Tsushima*, but everyone is only going to focus on the *Fortnite* controversy coming out of the show. Outside of *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Fortnite*, as it has been since last year, is the story of the show because of this.

Every company with a service has to think about a business model that caters to a company vision like Epic's while they're king. So the biggest question will be whether PlayStation merely caters to Epic or adopts a long-term strategy that lets other developers and publishers adopt the same release model of cross-buy, cross-save, and cross-play. That's the thing I got out of E3, which made for an interesting show to watch given the number of shared online spaces (*Anthem*, *Sea Of Thieves*, *The Division 2*, *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, *Skull & Bones*, *Fallout 76*, *Destiny 2*, etc) now on display from every publisher.
Martin Benn

Cross-play is going to happen, and Sony knows it. With a new generation coming, it simply can't afford to rest on its laurels.



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Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

Show and tell

E3 2018 was surprising, while also being a let-down in some areas. Microsoft walked off the stage having essentially screamed – and more importantly, showed – "We're still relevant!" Sure, we had the usual trio of *Halo*, *Forza* and *Gears Of War*, which the Internet loves to give them flak for, but the rest of the show gave us what we were looking for and what they needed to show us: a commitment to making Xbox better.

But if E3 2018 has told us anything about the future of Xbox, it's that Microsoft has recognised and accepted where its only shortcoming is (it's done a fantastic job with hardware and services). The announcement of the creation of a new studio in Santa Monica, and the purchase of four developers showed us that Microsoft is serious about the future of Xbox.

On the PlayStation side, there was nothing too exciting that was specific to the platform holder. Yes, *The Last Of Us Part II*, *Spider-Man*, *Ghost Of Tsushima* and *Death Stranding* all look impressive, but we've seen these games before. For those of us in Europe, we stay up until 2am because we want to see new announcements. For things we've already seen, YouTube will suffice. The reveal lineup announcements was thin simply because Sony doesn't have anything to announce at the moment. And that's okay. I'd rather a company didn't attend than disappoint me. That way, when they do show up, I'll know they've got something good.

Nintendo also had a lukewarm E3, in my opinion. *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* is on my list of games to buy, but the next *Smash* game always would have been. I was really hoping to see older titles brought to the Nintendo Switch. I'd happily part with my money if I could play a *Zelda* anthology. We know that games such as *Bayonetta 3*, *Animal Crossing*, *Pikmin 4* and *Metroid Prime 4* are all on their way to Nintendo Switch, but where were they? Even a minute-long trailer hinting at what's in store would have been just about enough to satiate.

Ultimately, E3 2018 felt like a dud for new announcements, but the calibre of games on show was still monumental. It's unfair of myself and many others to expect great announcements every year. Games take years and years to make, and you only get one chance to make a brilliant first impression. That's why studios wait until the right time to reveal the product of their years-long labour. But I can't help but look back on E3 2018, as a whole, disappointed.
Jordan Rowe

Weird, isn't it. We came away feeling much the same; for all the 8s on show, an E3 needs a 10 or two if it's to really go down in history.

Home and kitchen

I really think this E3 was a colossal cut-up. It's called the electronics-expo-something for a reason – I want to see more than just videogames. Every time it comes around I hope to hear more about appliances, but these damn kids don't get excited about side-loading toasters, or a more powerful puree function. The sad thing is that those are already old news in the kitchenware world, but you don't get to hear about that now, do you?

If E3 started talking about all electronics – and I mean oven, and I mean stereo, and I mean electric fan – not only would it expand some player horizons, but it would also garner a larger turnout for what is essentially a defunct concept of a convention. Why bother spending $300 on a ticket when I can stay at home and watch what happens, at the same time that the nobodies who felt it was so important to be in front of the TV screen, inside of the TV screen? And again, would I see any appliances at E3? Do I even need to answer?

People would naturally be more excited about new features of home tech if they got to see it first hand. For instance, at a car show, you don't even get to drive the cars. At E3, you barely get to play a game. Imagine being able to press the button yourself on an oven that won't come out for another three years. You wouldn't even have to turn it on, let's face it – just the tactile grip of the buttons is enough to reinvigorate your 'stamina'. They could save money on electricity this way, too. I don't even want to imagine how much money it costs to charge a single pixel on those large PlayStation presentation screens. Put *Beyond Good & Evil 2* in a corner, and let people rediscover kitchenware.
Charles Purcell

E3 stands for Electronic Entertainment Expo, which rather excludes ovens. It might be the football hangover, but is anyone else hungry?

Play and win

As a PlayStation 4 player, I have never been concerned about trophies. Since the PS3 era, I simply played for fun, knowing these trophies absolutely wouldn't turn into any rewards, whether physical or digital. But yesterday, I realised that I had reached 1,886 trophies.

The amount is not important. It isn't even big compared to a lot of other players, but I decided to make a joke on Twitter mentioning @PlayStation, saying that I thought this would be the perfect occasion for them to reward me with a digital copy of *The Order: 1886*. As I write these lines, they haven't replied. But this situation makes me think about the lack of purpose of those trophies. You put in place a system that encourages players to level up – but to what end? It would make perfect sense to reward players every step of the way, through every trophy level, with some sort of digital gift.

I am sure that players all around the world would welcome avatars, themes, images, discounts, OSTs and – why not? – some indie games. Honestly, it looks as if the system was designed with that kind of reward path in mind, then put on hold and implemented as a simple trophy progress bar. I didn't even want *The Order 1886* for free: that was a joke. What I would celebrate is someone within the company reading these lines and proposing a change.
Pedro J Gallardo

Trophies, like achievements, are designed for people for whom simply completing a task is reward enough. We feel your pain, though, so have a year's PlayStation Plus sub on us. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

For most of videogames' history thus far, the response of the industry to criticisms that games could be sexist was rather like that of innocent guitar genius Nigel Tufnel in Spinal Tap. When told that the record company were refusing to release their new album, Smell The Glove, because the cover was sexist, he replied: "What's wrong with being sexy?"

So it's a sign of the times that the developers of *Dead Or Alive 6*, a fighting-game series heretofore renowned for its fanatical attention to cartoonishly excessive physics of barely covered breasts and buttocks, have announced that the newest game will tone down the sexualisation of female characters, so that "everyone can play without being embarrassed". To this end, Yohei Shimbori said, virtual mammaries will move in a less "exaggerated" fashion, and women characters will be dressed in outfits that are designed for fighting in. Imagine!

Meanwhile, E3 observers were impressed by a trailer for *The Last Of Us Part II* that included an FMV scene of two women kissing, with all their clothes on. Videogames are really growing up, people cheered, although you might think that the precise extent to which they are growing up is demonstrated more by the fact that the tasteful lesbian snog is immediately followed by a scene in which one of the women is now in a dark forest and calmly sawing through the neck of a man before stabbing him in the throat for good measure. Sure, *The Last Of Us* is still a murder simulator, but now at least it's a murder simulator that is woke to the wider spectrum of human sexuality. Progress!

Such developments should indeed be applauded, but it's worth applying a sceptical eye to how much they really change. Just as with the first game, the trailer for *The Last Of Us Part II* shows the 'mature' content safely quarantined off in non-interactive CGI. To me that scene, so painstakingly dehumanised from the motion-capture actors' real performances, promises nothing so much as



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

Can we have women characters who win without first going through humiliating and degrading travails?

a weird virtual-sexbot dystopia, but never mind: the interactive part has the character going on a one-woman slaughterfest with hammer, arrows, and bullets, aided at crucial points by hammering on the square button in response to QTE prompts. It's just like any other videogame, in other words, except with possibly nicer frond movement.

It's nice, though hardly innovative at this point, to have a woman character who is as kickass as any male lead. More disturbingly, though, it's arguable that the modern aesthetics of high-definition computer-generated violence impart an inescapably pornographic element to scenes of women being beaten and wounded, even if they fight back. It's reminiscent of the way the rebooted *Tomb Raider* series voyeuristically shows a young Lara Croft staggering through assorted pain and filth, and presents her as a terrified young ingénue who depends on an assortment of father figures. This makes of the heroine a considerably more regressive figure than the coolly intelligent Lara of the original 1990s games.

We are living through a wider moment, it seems, in which cultural producers demonstrate how much they care about women by showing women enduring terrible suffering. This was dramatically justified, at least, in the first season of The Handmaid's Tale, some of the grimmest yet most beautiful and technically astonishing television ever made. But in season two, the series devolved in many people's eyes into a kind of dank, repetitive torture-porn. It became unwatchable to Fiona Sturges, for one, who wrote in the Guardian that the second season had "abandoned Atwood's social commentary and descended into cynical, pointless cruelty."

So there is a bigger question facing videogames than how much we should be delighted that women martial artists in videogames now dress like martial artists, or how much we should cheer that a woman can kiss a woman before whacking scores of men.

It's this: can we have women characters who win without first going through humiliating and degrading travails, and without simply becoming the female equivalent of all the wise-cracking male serial killers that games think we should admire? It's hardly unheard of in cultural history: think of Agatha Christie's detective heroine, Miss Marple, who triumphed through the power of her intellect alone. A modern videogame with a heroine like that really would be something to celebrate.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Love Island is a British reality TV show in which a bunch of horny young attractive people go to a Mediterranean villa for six weeks and are psychologically tortured until they experience emotions. I'd always shunned it, assuming, like many of you I suspect, that it was brainless nonsense. But enough people I like and respect said nice things about it, and in my current state of mind – the miserable middle of the Venn diagram of magazine deadlines and a two-month-old baby, now further addled by post-E3 jetlag – brainless nonsense is pretty much all I'm capable of.

I'm watching it on Netflix, which got the first two seasons recently as part of the promotional drive for the new series. I've never watched reality TV this way before, and as such I've never noticed the 'skip recap' button that Netflix offers up in such circumstances. My evenings are brief and prone to interruption, so it's rare for my wife and I to make it through an episode from start to finish in one sitting; we'll watch the last 20 minutes of one instalment and the first half-hour of the next before we have to switch it off because a child has woken up, or a parent is passing out. So the chance to skip the first couple of minutes of catch-up fluff is most welcome.

The 'previously on' segment is taken for granted in TV these days, but it's still rare in games. *Until Dawn* did it smartly; before that came *Alan Wake*. Obviously Telltale has been at it for a while, too. The common denominators there are a focus on story told in the style of TV and film – and in Telltale's case it's essential given the often months-long gap between episodes. Yes, it's important to be caught up with the story, when story is the meat of the thing. But that's no longer enough. Games are getting bigger and more complicated. They demand more of our time, and their makers want us to keep playing them for years. So why are they still so hard to come back to?



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

My agent's backpack is overflowing with materials and resources whose uses are a mystery

This is hardly a new phenomenon. The main reason I have never finished *Okami* – along with it being roughly 3,000 years long, of course – is that I got 40 hours or so in to it, then put it to one side and went and played something else. When I finally got around to going back to it I had no idea where I was supposed to be going, what I was supposed to be doing, or what was going on. Developers have tried, in part, to fix that with quest logs and objective markers, but this is an inelegant solution to what, in an era of go-anywhere open-world games, is an increasingly complex problem.

And it's one that, in this games-as-service age, is more urgently in need of a solution than ever. Like many of you, I assume, I played *Tom Clancy's The Division* for a couple of hours at launch and bounced off it. But it's always niggled at me. I knew it was something I'd probably like if I stuck with it, and after a thoroughly enjoyable E3 session with the forthcoming sequel I thought I'd give it another go.

Heavens, it's hard work. *The Division* has been expanded and improved upon tremendously since launch, and if you've kept pace with the game that's a wonderful thing. But to someone coming back after two years, it's horrible. The map was always busy, in that Ubisoft sort of way. Now it teems: the other night it took me five minutes to find the next story mission. My agent's backpack is overflowing with materials and resources whose uses are a mystery. There are vendors everywhere, selling things I'm not sure whether I will need in an hour or a couple of months. I bring up the inventory menu and am terrified by its morass of damage numbers, multiple currencies and obtuse terminology. Dialogue windows pop up explaining some new feature in a language that assumes I've been at the level cap for 18 months. It's overwhelming.

I'm the perfect audience for this game. I am precisely the sort of player Ubisoft Massive is targeting with *The Division 2*: someone with a history of devoting himself to a game for months on end, playing night after night, coughing up blindly for DLC expansions. I am a lapsed *Destiny* player looking for a fix, and Massive has the hook-up. I'm muddling through, thanks mostly to my knowledge of *Destiny* and how Ubisoft games tend to fit together. And I am enjoying myself. But many would have walked away by now. Endgames are one of my favourite things in games, but they can't exist without a beginning.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor. For a free recap of every column he's written to date, get in touch at the usual address*



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

For the first time in about 15 years, I watched this E3 from the sidelines, which to be honest felt a little bit like being the only kid whose parents wouldn't let them go to camp. My social feed was awash with friends sharing updates on their games, thoughts on newly announced titles and the usual outpouring of gossip, and there was a palpable sense that I was missing out. But after a few days of watching interviews and trailers online from the comfort of my office without the crushing crowds or the four-day hangover, it began to feel like a much more civilised approach to the event.

Part of that is that the experience of E3 or any major convention is so radically different for a developer. Instead of rushing from demo to demo, experiencing a unique sequence of fresh interviews and games, you are trapped in a single location for days on end, demoing the same section of your game over and over while answering the same questions time and again.

Or worse, you're trapped in a single location on a game that nobody is interested in covering, and you face a procession of cancelled interview requests as other schedules start to collapse, or bored interviewers checking their phones while two years of your life twitches on screen nearby. Once I was asked to give a demo to Steven Spielberg, but the room was so small that his enormous bodyguard couldn't fit through the door. He tried forward, sideways, at an angle, then gave up and quietly closed the door.

Exhaustion and repetition are your constant companions, and you begin to pray for someone to start the interview with evidence of a clear plan. If I can understand the article you're writing then I can give better answers, but too often it starts with, "So, tell me about the game," and you catch yourself launching into the same repetitive soundbites that you've been regurgitating for days. I challenge you to have a pithy answer when someone asks you, for the 20th time, "How many weapons are there in the game?"



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

Once I was asked to give a demo to Steven Spielberg, but the room was so small that his bodyguard couldn't fit

And usually, you're doing it in a tiny room with no air conditioning next to 30 other games, each competing to make their demo video more audible than the next. At E3 2012, *Assassin's Creed* was right beside *Just Dance*. To this day the opening bars of Flo Rida's Good Feeling make me want to puncture my ears with a pencil.

But then I remind myself that the corporate booth at a con is often the good version. At E3 2004 I remember staggering around a corner of the floor holding Gameboy Advance dev units (yes, they existed) trying to lure press into a game while they were already entranced by a nearby console marvel. I once demoed *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* by myself, which meant lugging two suitcases on and off planes, each holding an Xbox 360 plus gear, then setting them up in business parks across Europe for eight hours of demos, followed by repacking and heading back to the airport.

And then there are the games that just don't suit a convention environment at all. Demoing *The Sims* or *Spore* in five minutes is a nightmare. When the best part of the game is coming up with your own plan, setting it in motion and seeing what happens, how do you show it in a favourable light with a short slot where they can't touch the controller?

In most instances it's impossible to keep the attention of the people in the room. On a tour of New York once someone was paying so little attention that when they asked, without looking up, "Yes, but how creative can you *actually* be?" I replied that if you wanted to, you could design yourself a relatively convincing penis car and drive it into your very own vagina house. (Years later I found out that EA execs had wanted to fire me. Only my amazing producer, Lucy Bradshaw, had saved me from deportation.)

And all of these demos and interviews are done with unfinished code, just to add the fear of sudden failure to the mix. During our demo of *Assassin's Creed III* at Sony's E3 2012 conference, we were so worried that the in-development naval gameplay would crash that we hid an associate producer below the stage, mirroring my walkthrough on a second console just in case we had to switch inputs to keep the demo rolling.

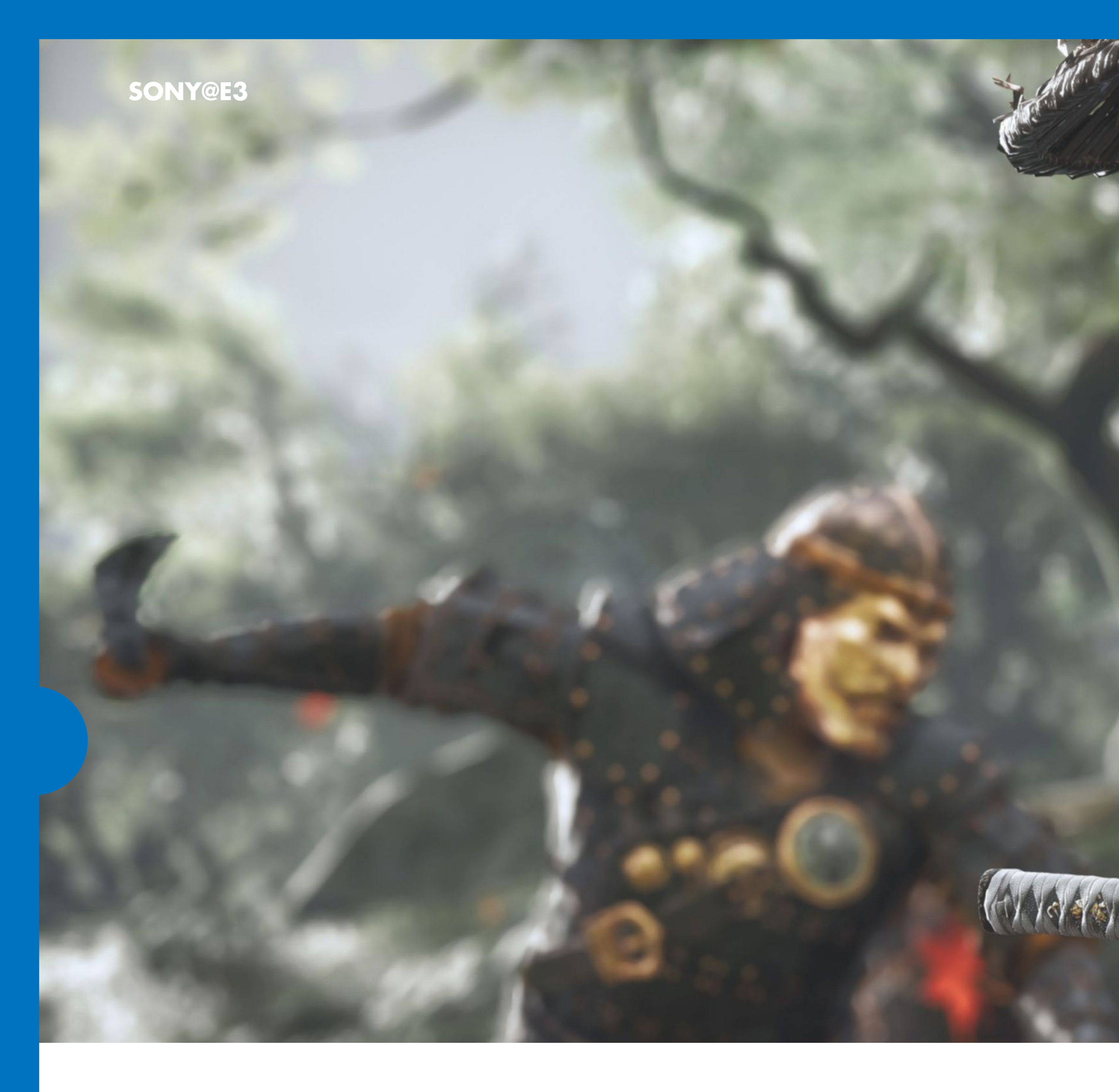
So next time you see a bleary-eyed developer shouting into a camera during an interview at a conference, or read the same answer three times in different interviews, spare a thought for the developer, trapped in an airless room, trying to show the best side of a work in progress.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

#322



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS IN LOS ANGELES



GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Developer Sucker Punch Productions **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** TBA

There's a certain sort of art to being the one holding the controller during an E3 demo. You must play flawlessly, certainly, following the script to the letter. Yet the behind-closed-doors player is not just an actor, but the director too, forever coaxing the camera into its ideal position, lining up the perfect shot.

There's certainly plenty of that in our first proper look at *Ghost Of Tsushima*, a game that wears its Kurosawa influence on its sleeve and is, like so much of Sony's firstparty output, cinematic to a fault. When protagonist Jin hops on his horse and heads for the horizon, the camera pulls round to frame him and his steed in the bottom corner, to better show off the view. Is that a stylistic flourish from the developer, or the player? Similarly, at times in combat, the action freezes, Jin's handler panning the camera to show stern Mongol faces and elegant sword poses, blood spatters caught in mid-air.

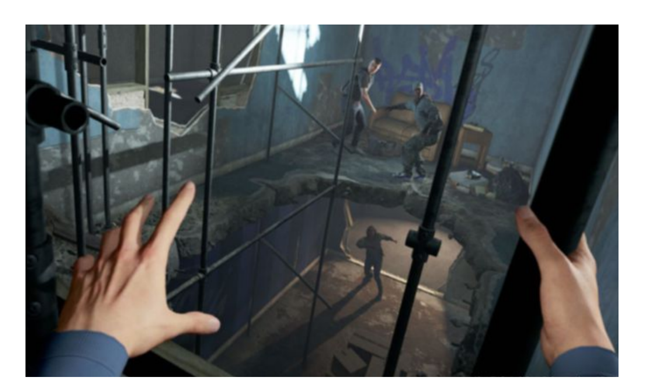


Our demo is played with Japanese audio, which is naturally a much better fit for the game. Sucker Punch, oddly, won't confirm if it will be an option in the final game

The sudden resurgence of Japanese swordplay – *Tsushima* was joined this E3 by *Sekiro* and *Nioh 2* – may mean Sucker Punch's game feels a little less special than when it was announced. But *Tsushima* ploughs its own furrow as a realistic game set in a real place, rather than using Japanese history as a springboard into fantasy. Sucker Punch has conducted extensive field research on Tsushima, an island between Japan and Korea. Combat has been designed with the help of an expert in ancient Japanese martial arts. Sony has embedded a Japanese producer at the studio, while its Tokyo operation provides further support.

If that might beg the question of whether a western studio should be making this game, *Ghost Of Tsushima*'s production values provide the answer. It's sumptuous stuff, its visual fidelity flattered further by a slavish attention to detail, driven by the desire to make the player feel like they really are swishing three feet of steel around on a Japanese island in the year 1274.

Sucker Punch won't be drawn too much on the intricacies of the combat system, but tells us the difficulty has been dialled down for the E3 demo – just as well, given how busy the chap at the controls is with camera positioning. The studio wants the player to feel a connection to Jin, and that comes in part from knowing that he is never more than a few errant seconds from death. If Sucker Punch can truly follow through on that promise, this could be a rare blockbuster indeed; one that seeks to punish, as much as it does to enthral.

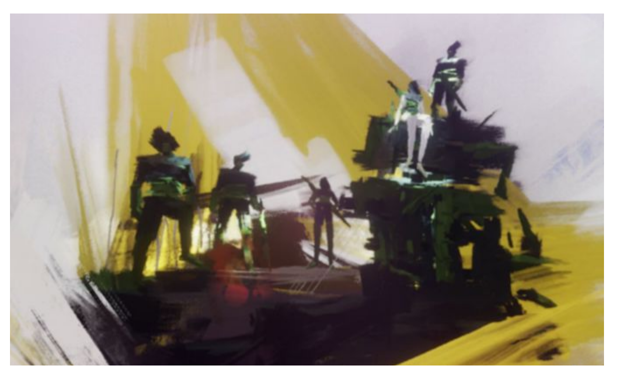


BLOOD & TRUTH

Developer SIE London Studio **Publisher** SIE
Format PSVR **Release** TBA

One of the highlights of our first sit-down with this cockney shootout, at Paris Games Week last year, was a climactic set-piece in which shooting a fire extinguisher afforded a brief spell of slow motion. Now it's become a game-wide mechanic, activated by pressing both Move buttons simultaneously.

We need it; this is a bit of a struggle, not least because of a spotty Bluetooth connection. Enemy dialogue is dynamically chosen based on player performance, and in among all the note-perfect epithets of modern-day London ("I'll merk 'im!") are instances of "This bloke's shit!" Well, yes, but let's blame the Bluetooth. Questions remain over how it'll all hold up over a full game, but a vertiginous climbing section, and the addition of dual wielding and heavy weapons, show London Studio's got more than an abusive rail shooter in store.



DREAMS

Developer Media Molecule **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** 2018

Finally, *Dreams* is in our hands – and it soon becomes clear why it hasn't been allowed there before. Half an hour's noodling isn't enough to grasp the creative mode's control system. We repeatedly forget which set of buttons make our sculpture larger and smaller, which makes a copy of it and which pulls up the menu.

But slowly, magically, the ice cream-shaped spiral staircase in our head takes form. A simple input produces multiple clones from a single step; we then use the DualShock's motion controls to wrap our staircase around the cone effortlessly. Another button drops in a character that we scurry to the peak, victorious. We may have to consult a cheat sheet when the promised beta arrives, but make no mistake: the Sony PR practically had to pry our hands off the controller once our demo time was up.



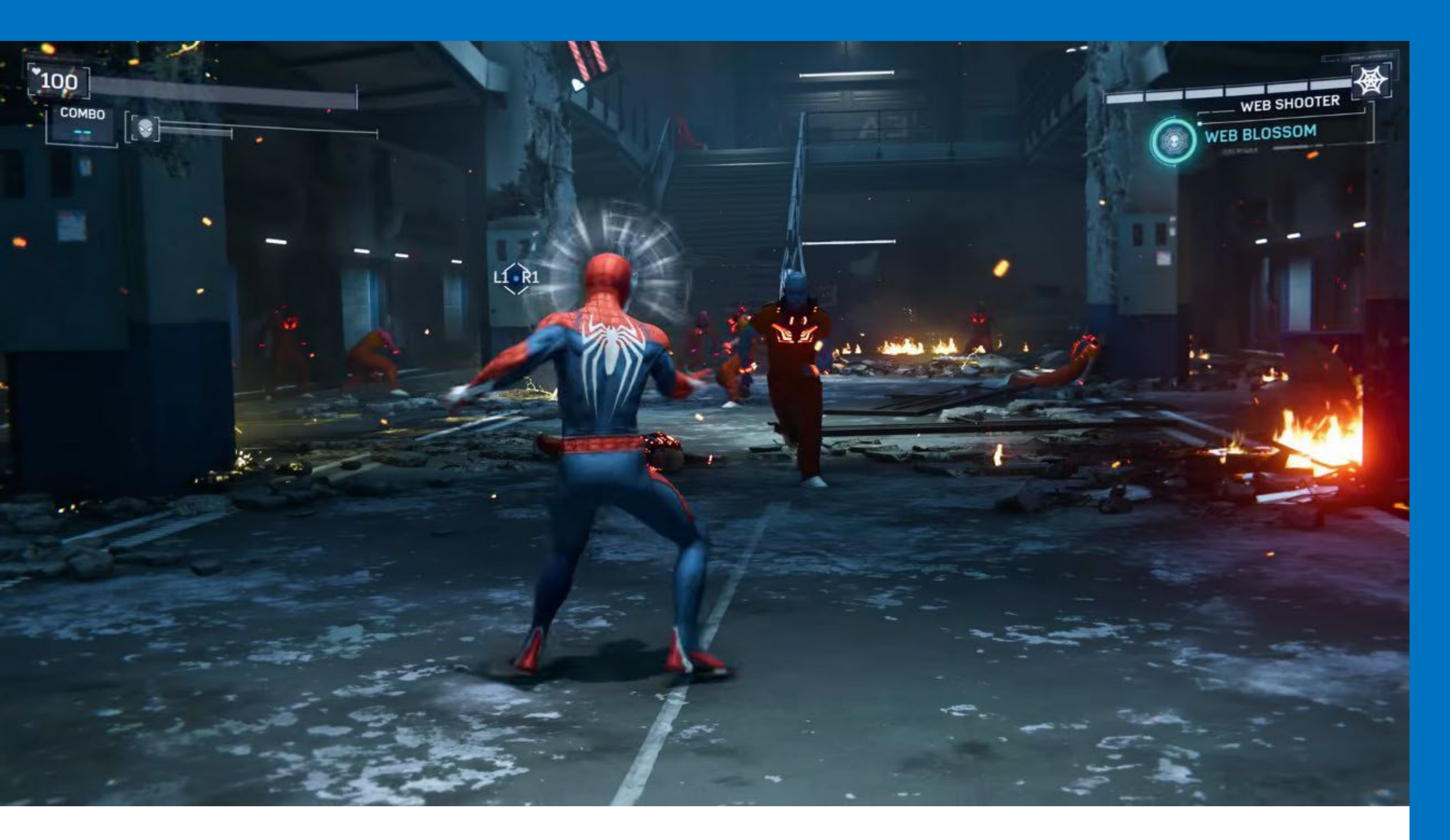
DÉRACINÉ

Developer FromSoftware, SIE Japan Studio **Publisher** SIE **Format** PSVR **Release** 2018

Its title a French word meaning 'uprooted from its natural environment', it was perhaps fitting – though no less galling – that FromSoft's first foray into VR was ejected from Sony's main E3 conference, announced instead during the post-show livestream. Perhaps there were concerns that an audience baying for *Bloodborne* might have exploded upon seeing the developer's logo. *Déraciné* is a very different proposition, although we leave our demo satisfied that we've just played a Hidetaka Miyazaki game.

There's the curious premise, for instance, which casts you as a faerie out to prove your existence to a class of 19th-century schoolchildren. We roam the halls reading notes, solving puzzles and eavesdropping. The place is populated not only by the doll-like children, whose gentle affect and glassy-eyed stares unsettle, but also by the translucent figures of their past echoes.

Flitting between the two timelines, simply by exploring, has you overhear a past conversation about a key indicating it can be found in somebody's future pocket, or where to discover herbs that will change the flavour of the children's soup. A Life Ring, meanwhile, allows you to drain living things and transfer their essence into withered objects to announce your presence. Whether this unnerving ability will take a dark turn later is unknown, but if we had a FromSoft game sussed from a half-hour demo, we'd confess ourselves disappointed.



SPIDER-MAN

Developer Insomniac Games **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** September 7

After yet another on-rails combat sequence at the Sony press conference, we were starting to wonder whether Insomniac's *Spider-Man* hadn't developed agoraphobia. Not so. A later hands-on demo finally lets us loose on an open-world New York City, and the resultant web-slinging session is nothing short of electrifying. We hurtle through the airspace, above streets clogged with honking yellow taxis, with a zen-like precision and ease – sometimes from just one hand. Releasing R2 at the apex of a swing gives us Peter Parker in controlled free-fall, pulling off lazy, languid flips with slight adjustments of the stick; a minimal reticule suggests a spot to which we might attach our next web.

We could keep going forever – flying around three-hundred-foot high corners in joyful arcs, adding bursts of speed by tapping X, turning a misjudged swing into a wall-run – but an objective marker beckons. We reluctantly change trajectory, and press the bumpers to send out dual webs, reeling ourselves onto a girder above a gaggle of Fisk's goons. And while it's not flying through the air on a silky trapeze, *Spider-Man*'s combat proves engaging. Taps of Square send Parker into a series of flashy melee moves, while holding it down launches an enemy. Triangle spits out a web which can turn a foe into so much skipping rope as Spidey flings them through his legs and into the ground; a long press latches it onto crates, barrels or bodies to swing around as weapons.

We hurtle through the airspace, above streets clogged with taxis, with a zen-like precision

Sliding underneath enemies to attack from the other side, bouncing effortlessly from wall to brawl and back again: here, *Spider-Man* distinguishes itself from the similar rhythms of Rocksteady's work by incorporating the Marvel superhero's acrobatic sense of fun. Simple inputs mean that we can comfortably improvise and experiment, reshuffling combat elements into new configurations – setting up a tripwire that webs a bruiser into scaffolding before we bring it all crashing down onto more enemies, for instance.

The disappointment of the demo is a boss fight against Shocker which does little to show off Spidey's flexible moveset. Sure, plenty of interior decorating crumbles dramatically, and swinging around the ceiling to avoid shock waves is fun enough. But the battle boils down to waiting for Shocker's energy shield to waver, then smashing a piece of rubble into him – and repeating it three times during each of three identical phases. With Sony so clearly confused as to where to place emphasis when it comes to *Spider-Man*, we hope Insomniac is well aware of where, how and why its game shines. But after a couple of worrying appearances, this showing has convinced us that this *Spider-Man* could truly be worthy of the comics' titular adjectives: amazing, superior, spectacular indeed.



DEATH STRANDING

Developer Kojima Productions **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** TBA

Well, knock us over with a feather: it *exists*. A few intriguing cinematic trailers set the tone, but it wasn't entirely clear whether the *Metal Gear Solid* creator was actually making a videogame in the hours between breakfasting with Guillermo Del Toro. But Sony's E3 conference brought footage of honest-to-god gameplay. From what we've seen so far, *Death Stranding* looks remarkably like Hideo Kojima's eerie take on the walking simulator.

Norman Reedus' playable protagonist is a delivery man of sorts: "Someone with a skill-set akin to a blue-collar worker," Kojima says. He's not out to save the world, but to reconnect the remnants of it, we're told, through his labour. (The name Sam Porter Bridges is, perhaps, a little on the nose.) Set amongst craggy mountain vistas and roiling rivers, Bridges' on-foot journeys see him struggling over rocky terrain and stumbling through black craters. Futuristic carts float behind him. At one point, he's lugging around what appears to be a human body.

Unsurprisingly, it's a bizarre concept for Kojima Productions' game – even before all the talk of chiral allergies, cryptobiotes and the 'timefall' rain which accelerates biological processes in whatever it touches. But there are glimpses of familiarity that ground things: a stealth section, while admittedly involving a foetus-powered torch, shows Bridges sneaking by an invisible group of entities as Venom Snake might. There's also a glimpse of Bridges holding the kind of gun we might expect from a Bungie game – even though Kojima has insisted combat will be optional, and that your goal is not to fight but to make reparations. "A lot of people out there are interested in shooters," he said in one interview, "and people can do that in this game. However I would not recommend that and through playing the game, people would realise that is not the ideal option."

Its lofty status means its riskier gambits may send ripples of thought throughout the industry

While failure in *Death Stranding* does mean death, the consequences for Bridges are negligible, but the impact on the environment serious. Being consumed by an entity triggers a 'voidout': while Bridges can return, a crater is left behind. What effect this may have on how you move through the world remains unknown, but altering what the death state (apparently a playable section) in a videogame can mean is precisely the sort of thing we expect from Kojima. Not that this hasn't been done in other, smaller games. But *Death Stranding*'s lofty status means its riskier gambits may send some new ripples of thought throughout the industry. *Death Stranding*'s odd ideas stood in stark contrast to the rest of Sony's homogenous violence this year, and while there's too much unseen and unspoken to judge it definitively, we are, in many ways, simply glad that it exists.



THE LAST OF US PART II

Developer Naughty Dog **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

It started out with a kiss, and to be honest we'd have preferred if it had stuck with it as well. For all Naughty Dog's self-satisfaction – for once entirely justifiable – at having painstakingly animated the most believable snog in videogame history, that it was used as the set-up for another five minutes of desperate stealth and brutal murder stuck in the craw like a scavenged rusty blade.

It felt a little like a studio that wants to have its cake and eat it, the sweet kiss between Ellie and Dina suggesting a game that wants to carry its medium forward, but what followed showing that we're not really getting anywhere. We're not complaining about obvious thematic progress – but imagine if that level of care, attention and forward thinking was also used to find a way around the wanton death and destruction from which Naughty Dog seems inseparable.

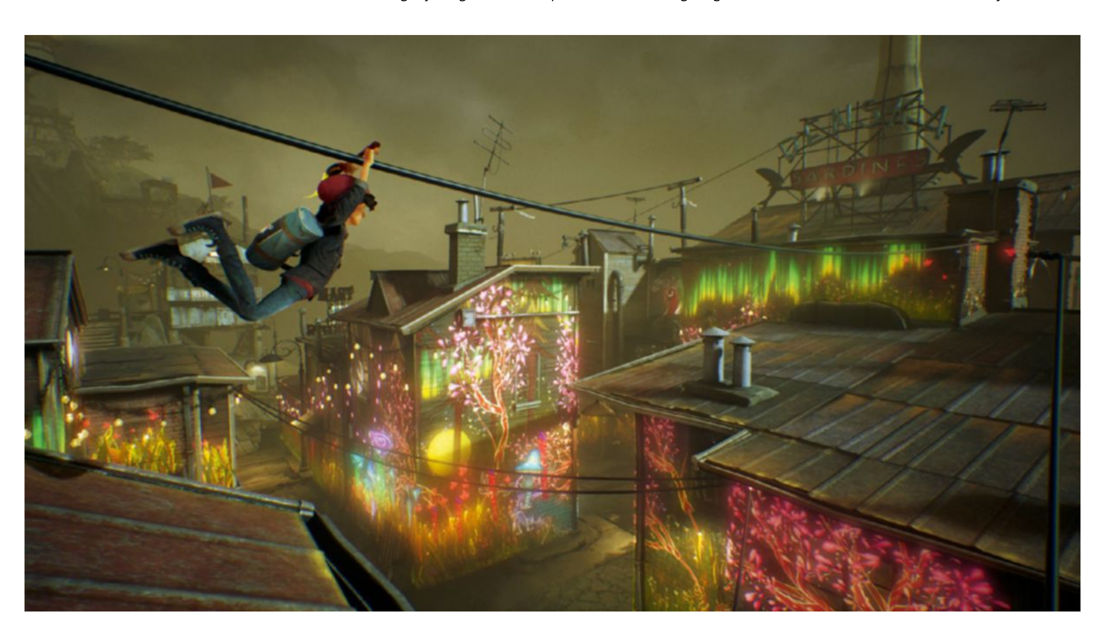


DAYS GONE

Developer SIE Bend Studio **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** February 22

If the lack of *Days Gone* at Sony's E3 press conference suggested a worrying lack of confidence in Bend Studio's zombie adventure, sitting down with it rams the point home. This is dreary, unremarkable stuff, a repurposing of *The Last Of Us*' linear template in an open-world setting with nary an idea to call its own.

Most troublingly of all, what once seemed like the game's greatest asset – the crowd tech that sees hordes of mutants flood toward you as one – may actually be its biggest problem. 'Freakers' may have the numbers. But they're weak, with most going down in one hit, and there's no limit on carry capacity, robbing the loot-craft-kill loop of essential tension. Bend's insistence that the protagonist's motorbike is a 'character' smacks of desperation; on this evidence it's going to need to steal the show to save *Days Gone* from the scrapheap.



CONCRETE GENIE

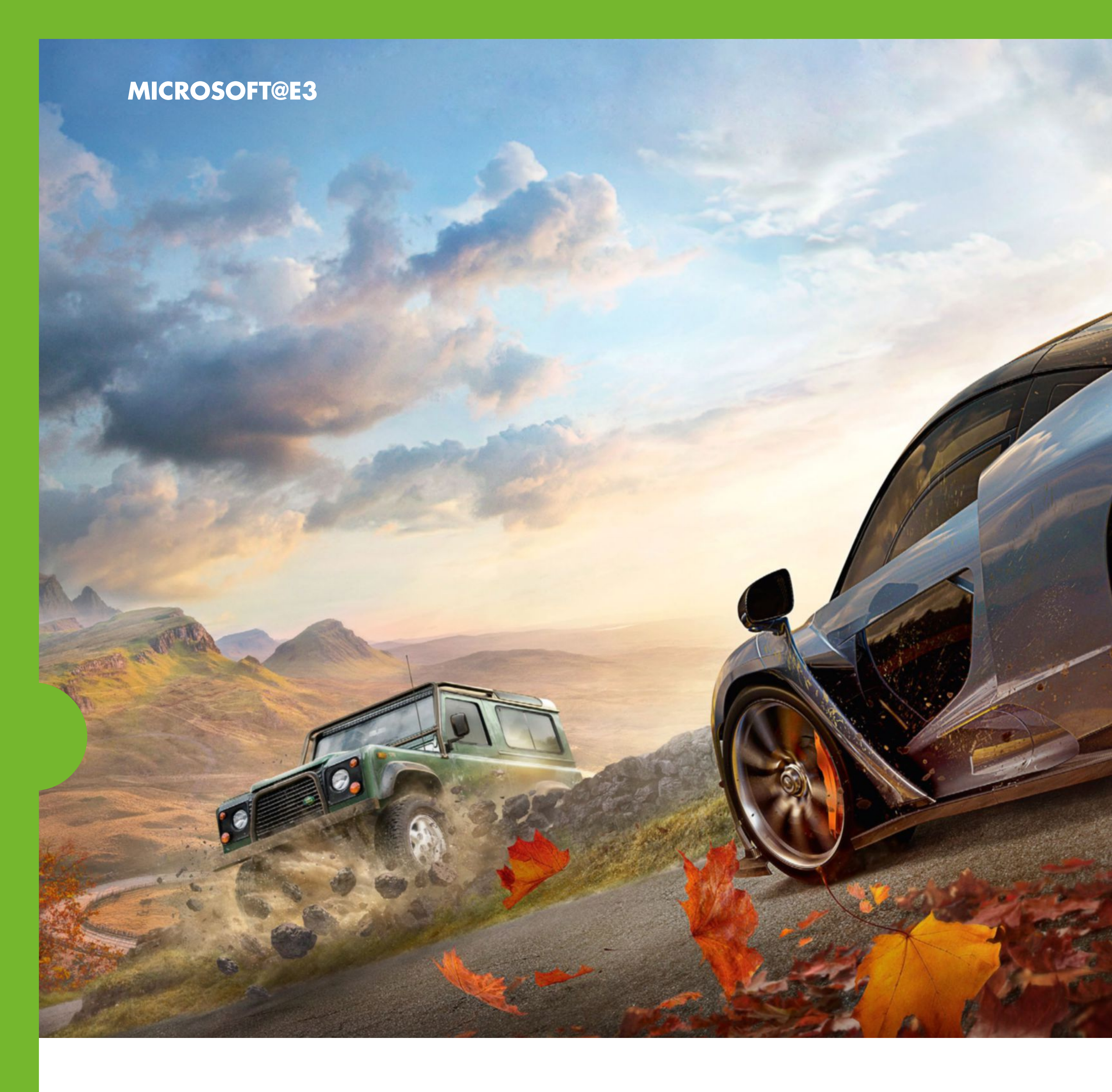
Developer Pixelopus **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** 2018

If the concept of childhood had a dial, *Concrete Genie* turns it all the way up. Its setting is an exaggerated version of every small town: mired in fog, shambling shacks cramped together miserably, bullies roaming the streets looking for fights to pick. Luckily, hero Ash has an amped-up version of his imagination to match, empowered by a magic paintbrush that lets him graffiti living masterpieces.

Unlockable animated brushes let you turn dingy corners into places glowing with colour and life. Holding a trigger to paint with a pine tree brush, contorting it with the DualShock's motion controls, conjures up a Wonka-esque shrub in a forest scene that illuminates the last string of lightbulbs we need to complete an area.

The 'genies' are the real delights. Twisty horns, impossibly long torsos and multiple limbs can be sketched and given life. These imaginary friends gambol about the walls, sometimes following, sometimes needing to be called after becoming distracted by food or games. They'll request things such as apples to eat or butterflies to chase: we appease a squat, excitable red companion by setting little painted fires, and it grants us Super Paint to clear the 'darkness'.

The interferences of the bullies irritate, placing a time limit that stifles some painting sessions and forcing you into wobbly parkour. Otherwise, *Concrete Genie* was a welcome bright spot of whimsy in the shadow of the show floor.



FORZA HORIZON 4

Developer Playground Games **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** October 2

Forza is essentially Microsoft's *Call Of Duty*, its *Assassin's Creed*; an IP so important to the balance sheet that it is bounced back and forth between multiple studios to ensure a new game is on shelves in time for Thanksgiving every year. And, like *COD* and *Assassin's*, it therefore faces a familiar problem. How do you get people excited about this year's model? Our answer comes within seconds of the announcement trailer, as a McLaren Senna canes it down a country road past a thatched-roof cottage, a tractor, a pillar box. Merry old England.

Forgive us for being parochial, but after gallivanting around western Europe before *Forza Horizon 3*'s gap year in Australia, there's something gently heartwarming in seeing Leamington Spa's Playground Games finally coming home. *FH3*'s Australia was necessarily condensed, and so will the new game's UK be, with the Lake District



One note of disappointment in our demo is the announcer, who speaks with an American accent. If ever there were a game that deserved a plummy Hugh Grant type, it's this

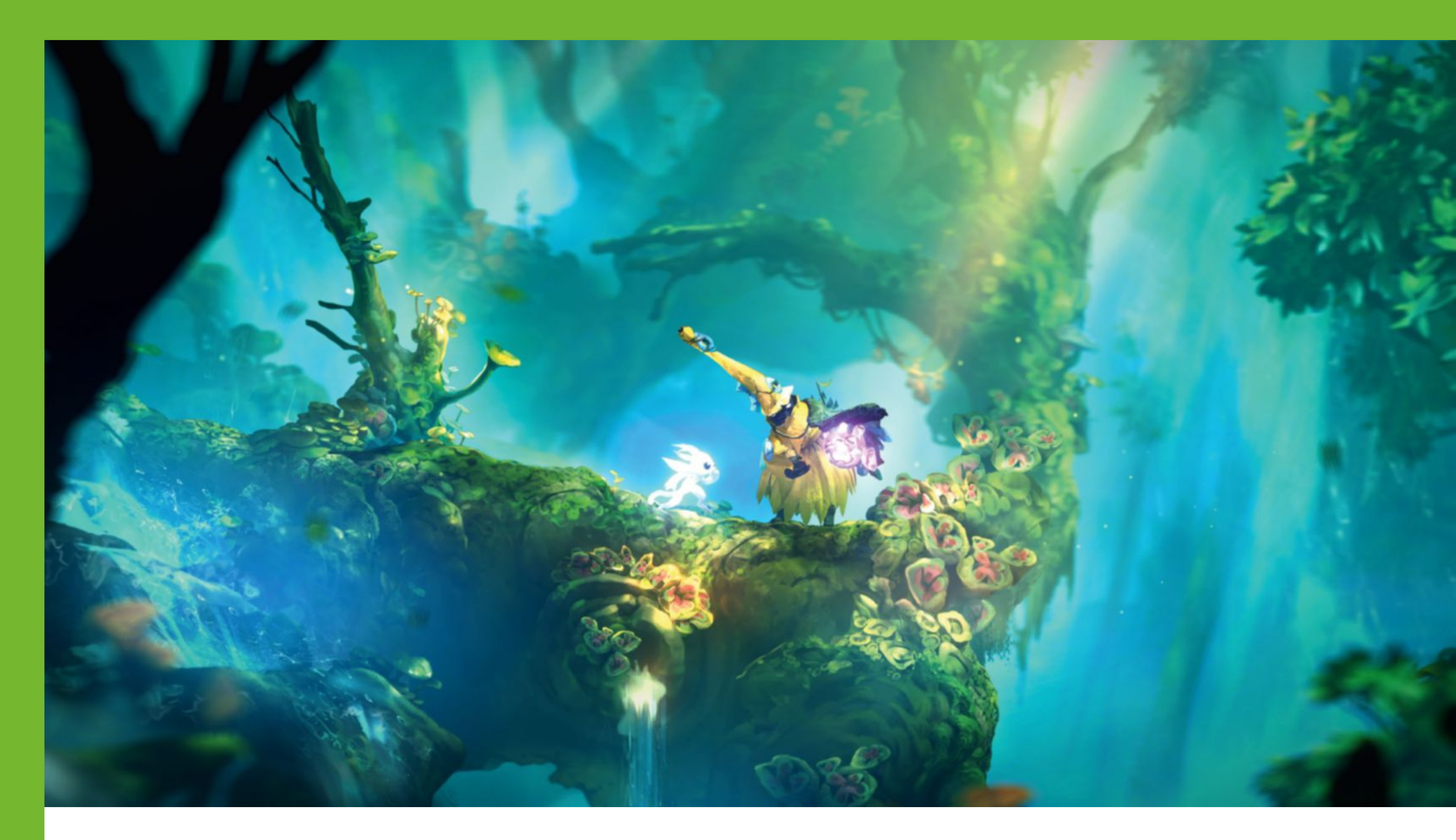
and Edinburgh the only confirmed locations so far. So long as we can chuck a Hackney carriage around a couple of hedge-lined hairpins, we're fine with it.

The principal hook this time out is a change in seasons. Our demo, set in the opening minutes of the game, introduces us to all four in quick order; in the final game, once you've got through the opening act, the season will roll over each week. Foreign readers might find that pace of change a little artificial, but trust us, we've known much shorter summers than that.

From this central idea come other innovations. Weather can change the scenery – a frozen lake opening up a path to a new area, say, or piled-up hay bales causing obstructions that weren't there before. And compressing a year into four weeks necessarily does away with the Horizon festival around which this game's predecessors were based.

There are other little tweaks under the hood. This is the first game in the series to be built from the ground up with HDR support in mind, and it'll run at 60fps on Xbox One X. You'll now see other players out on the open road, the game falling back to Drivatars if your connection drops.

But it's the cheery, slightly twee spirit of the thing that's the biggest draw. *Forza* may be as tough to make and market as any other annual game, but this is really two series in one, the lighter, more knockabout tone of the *Horizon* games always feeling like fresh air after the straight-laced mainline series. By offering us some much-needed catharsis after the daily commute, this might just be the most alluring *Forza* game yet.



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

Developer Moon Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2019

A small number of true Xbox exclusives means that much rests on the tiny white shoulders of this indie darling. But the return of the titular guardian spirit from 2015's *Ori And The Blind Forest* sees the familiar hero in a different form: if *The Blind Forest* was a coming-of-age tale, *The Will Of The Wisps* shows Ori as a fully evolved fighter.

Ori is now more ninja than pet, kitted out with a fresh set of abilities to face a Metroidvania world somehow even more beautiful than the last. Lighting is now hand-painted onto 2D assets and textures to afford a more natural illumination that shifts and changes as you move through the world. Vines sway and the branch platforms we spring between wobble in our wake. Ori glows and spins with a blinding blue phosphorescence while twirling a Spirit Edge through enemies like a drum major with a deadly baton.

When asked what they expected from an *Ori* sequel, the overwhelming response from fans was an improved combat system. And by taking pains to combine Ori's classic fluidity of movement with a greater arsenal of weapons to use, Moon Studios' latest is more *Metroid* than ever whilst still retaining the puzzle-platforming pull of the original *Ori*. A new Burrow ability not only unlocks new paths through levels, letting Ori swim, dolphin-like, through sand (with an often crucial boost to upward momentum when exiting) but also lets you attack shelled enemies from below. A Spirit Arc bow can be upgraded in numerous ways. A Splintershard power-up has the bow fire three arrows that each do a third of the damage – until you upgrade this shard further, that is, to increase damage or push it to five simultaneous arrows. A rigid skill tree is replaced in favour of upgrade paths that can be built out in any order, and only jump is hard-mapped to A, letting you completely customise your loadout.

It's strange to see such a focus on sweet little Ori's ability to whack seven bells out of the opposition

The changes are about offering more freedom, from trying not to lock the player into tough situations by letting them circumvent and circle back around to certain puzzles, to, we're told, potentially moving away from the first game's frustrating manual checkpointing system. Given that it was the original's emotional tale that we found most arresting, it's strange to see such a focus on sweet little Ori's ability to whack seven bells out of the opposition – although the appearance of a baby owl, suggesting a continuation of events from *The Blind Forest*, shows the spirit's scrap-happy attitude will be for good reason. Our Ori's all grown up, then: whether the Metroidvania's new muscles can carry the weight of a generation of Xbox users' expectations, however, is another matter.

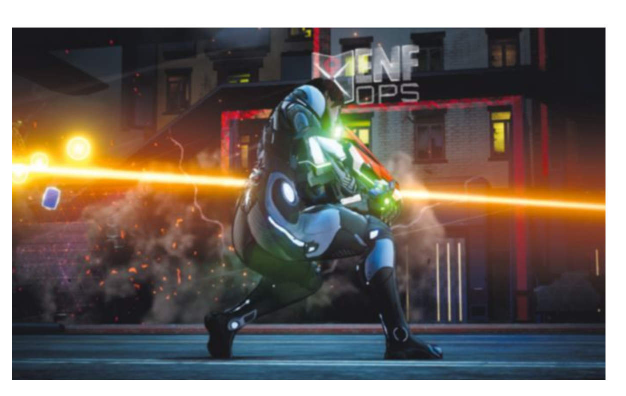


CUPHEAD: THE DELICIOUS LAST COURSE

Developer Studio MDHR **Publisher** Microsoft
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Studio MDHR's lavishly animated shoot 'em up always did have a cute sense of humour, and Cuphead: The Delicious Last Course – or DLC – is set to serve up another helping of inventive visual design for us to feast our eyes on. Sadly, there was no in-game footage to speak of during its announcement at the Xbox conference: the hand-drawn style is, we suppose, time-consuming work.

It will add a fourth boss fight-stuffed isle to explore, plus a selection of new weapons and ability charms. And while the real draw of Cuphead DLC is to see what bizarre creations Studio MDHR's artists can come up with next, new playable character Ms Chalice will apparently offer "a brand-new twist on the classic *Cuphead* moveset". Okay, so it'll likely still be just a particularly pretty *Contra*, but it's a tasty prospect nonetheless.



CRACKDOWN 3

Developer Sumo Digital **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format Xbox One **Release** February

You'd have thought *Crackdown 3* to be central to the company's E3 showing this year. Pre-show rumours of a delay to 2019 weren't as bad as initially feared – it'll be out in February – but that Microsoft saw fit to limit *Crackdown 3*'s stage presence to a two-minute trailer is a worrying sign indeed.

There are more. Dave Jones, who unveiled *Crackdown 3*'s jaw-dropping, cloud-powered destruction tech at Gamescom 2015, is no longer attached to the project. Neither is his studio Reagent Games: Microsoft now says that Sumo Digital, originally assigned to the singleplayer component, is now its sole development partner. The Cloudgine tech that powered the Gamescom demo was recently acquired by Epic Games, and Microsoft is coy on whether *Crackdown 3* still supports it. Quite what's left after all that is anyone's guess.



GEARS 5

Developer The Coalition **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2019

It wasn't exactly a surprise to see a new *Gears Of War* unveiled at this year's E3. For one thing, Microsoft led up to the announcement with *Gears Tactics* and *Gears Pop* in what must be the most laughable instance of burying the lede that we've seen in some time. Eventually, it transpired that, yes, we'd be getting another mainline *Gears* game – and it would be fronted by an actual human being, not a Funko monstrosity.

And a *lady* one at that. Microsoft relies on *Gears* as a key franchise to sell its consoles, and so the missive to The Coalition was likely, 'We need another one, but mix it up a bit.' Thus, the new entry's title has been officially clipped to the more minimalist *Gears 5*, and supporting character Kait Diaz has been promoted to role of playable protagonist. The rest, however, remains familiar. An emotionally charged campaign scene, following on from the events of *Gears Of War 4*, shows Diaz ready to go AWOL to solve the mystery of the messages she's been receiving through nightmares.

Series stalwarts Del Walker and JD Fenix will return to help Kait on her journey through the largest world in the *Gears* series to date. Twoplayer splitscreen co-op returns as an optional way to play. And, of course, there will be big, toothy chainsaw guns, fleshy enemies, and much urgent grunting.



TUNIC

Developer Andrew Shouldice **Publisher** Finji
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Going into E3, it seemed the industry had changed its attitude to the way it announced games, thinking it better to keep one's powder dry until a game is almost done. Then Microsoft announced a next-gen *Halo*, and Bethesda revealed its slate for the next decade. Still, they're no Andrew Shouldice. *Tunic*'s creator was showing his game off within two weeks of starting work on it.

Not much has changed since his screenshots first started doing the rounds in 2015 (apart from the title, twice). *Tunic* is in clear creative hock to Link's vintage adventures, right down to the protagonist's green garb and the look of the currency he collects. Pacey, involved combat and a sci-fi twist mean this is at least a little more than the sum of its rather derivative parts – and it does look lovely. Little wonder Shouldice was so keen to show it off.



NIER: AUTOMATA: BECOME AS GODS EDITION

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Square Enix
Format Xbox One **Release** Out now

Fret not, Xbox owners: 2B hasn't been replaced by an ugly old man (a little joke for long-term *Nier* fans there). In fact, don't expect many changes from the PS4 version at all. The Become As Gods Edition includes *Automata*'s slightly underwhelming DLC, but that's your lot. Still, Xbox One X owners do get an enhanced edition, and though the visual improvements are fairly negligible, a userbase that hasn't had much to crow about can reasonably lay claim to having the definitive version of Yoko Taro's fascinating, thoughtful ARPG. It may not have been a world premiere nor some tenuous exclusive, but it says much for *Automata* that Microsoft considered it enough of a coup to put it alongside *Crackdown 3* at its presser. As far as we're concerned, the more people that get to play it the better. Now Square, about that Switch version...



BATTLETOADS

Developer Dlala Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** Xbox One **Release** TBA

Every year, without fail, we have our fish-out-of-water moment – the point where we are reminded that, while we are notionally at E3 with pals, peers and colleagues, we are never quite at home. A couple of years back it was the rapturous reception afforded Shawn Layden's announcement of the *Crash Bandicoot* remaster, when the Sony crowd lost their minds. A few years before that, during the *Assassin's Creed* Unity demo on Ubisoft's stage, an excitable chap a few rows behind us screamed "Fuck yeah!" at the top of his lungs when the guillotine blade dropped on an NPC. At E3 2018 it was Microsoft's turn.

All of which is to say that we've never really understood the love for *Battletoads*, the Rare-made NES platformer of famously punishing difficulty starring four besunglassed amphibians. It's been something of a running joke for Xbox ever since Phil Spencer presented at a Windows 10 event wearing a t-shirt bearing its logo, a will-they-won't-they romance that finally got its payoff this year. With Rare these days a little too important to make a rubbish Ninja Turtles ripoff, development duties have been passed to another UK Studio, Essex-based Dlala. Details are scant, but one thing's for sure: Phil Spencer needs to get some more t-shirts printed.



HALO INFINITE

Developer 343 Industries **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

For a moment, we wondered whether we were about to hear David Attenborough's dulcet tones, as sweeping vistas and candid shots of wildlife straight out of Planet Earth filled our view. It came as a genuine surprise, then, when the Master Chief's helmet popped up on screen. It's been three years since *Halo 5: Guardians*' release, so a new game was perhaps to be expected. But *Halo Infinite* looks to be something different altogether.

Granted, it would have been nice to see a bit more of it. The reveal was merely a demonstration of what 343's shiny new engine, Slipspace, is capable of. From the looks of it, it can do herds of stampeding wildebeest kicking up dust, grassy fields flowing endlessly into mountain passes, and water that could even make the technical artists over at Rare raise an eyebrow. From the looks of it, it can do an open world. That would certainly be a logical move for a series whose once-feted singleplayer campaigns have rather lost their way in latter instalments.

It's yet to be confirmed, but the games-as-service model would make sense for the most important bit of intellectual property on Microsoft's books: indeed, the title is a deliberate move away from the linear, numbered instalments we've been trained to expect. And while a refresh is certainly needed if *Halo* hopes to compete with a new breed of contemporary shooter – 343 promises that it'll be taking the series in "new and unexpected directions," but then you would say that, wouldn't you – it's comforting to know that *Infinite* remains grounded in *Halo* history. This will be a sequel continuing on from the events of the previous game and will focus on the Master Chief.

The lack of release date is a clear indication that this is a project with an uncertain timeline

Halo 5's Legendary ending suggests that *Infinite* will be set on another Halo ring – the popular theory being that this is the last of the original 12 Halos, Installation 07, or Zeta Halo. But most of the details concerning the plot remain steeped in mystery: the strange writing on the stone wall, and whether the AI chip that Master Chief inserts into the back of his helmet signals the return of Cortana, a newer model of her, or a different AI companion entirely.

The lack of release date is another indication that *Infinite* is a project with an uncertain timeline. It was par for the course at an E3 where overeager publishers announced games that we might not even play this decade, leaving us feeling slightly let down once the initial thrill had faded. Still, a venerable series being reinvented anew is cause for excitement, and we're optimistic about *Halo* broadening its horizons. Lord knows when, but a former king has designs on reclaiming the throne.



SUPER SMASH BROS ULTIMATE

Developer Bandai Namco Studios/Sora Ltd **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** December 7

Nintendo's headliner on the show floor took up even more space during its E3 Direct. Dedicating the bulk of its main broadcast at the industry's biggest show says much for how important *Smash* has become, but its prominence speaks mostly to the format-holder having little else of substance to show. Shinya Takahashi appeared to remind us that this was but "a small portion of what we're currently working on" – in other words, don't panic, there's good stuff on the way – but after promising a steady stream of games, *Smash* is not only Nintendo's headline act this year. It's pretty much the whole bill.

And, let's face it, this isn't a totally new game, much as Nintendo might pretend otherwise. It's a greatest-hits package, basically, building upon the Wii U game (although to our weary eyes it didn't look quite as good) by bringing back every fighter from all previous entries. Which means the likes of Snake, Ice Climbers, Young Link and Pichu



returning to the roster, though you'll begin, as in the N64 original, with a selection of just eight fighters, with the rest needing to be unlocked.

Only one new entrant has been revealed so far. *Splatoon*'s Inkling is a fine addition, a tricky fighter that can call upon a range of weapons, from a Splattershot that covers opponents in ink, ensuring they take more damage from follow-up attacks, to a roller that leaves them stuck to the platform, vulnerable to smashes. Yet these abilities are bound to an ink supply that leaves them exposed once drained: you'll need to find a safe spot to refill. Their home stage, Moray Towers, is loosely based on the Japan-favourite *Splatoon* map, and it makes a pleasant change to roll down its ramps without worrying about sniper fire. After its revival in the Octo Expansion, original *Splatoon* special Killer Wail returns as the Inkling's Final Smash, with several others having been trimmed to get to the point quicker.

Technically there's another newcomer, though Daisy is a Peach reskin, joining Dark Pit and Lucina among the clones that have been reclassed as 'echo fighters'. If that seemed faintly desperate, so too did Masahiro Sakurai's desire to highlight UI refinements and sundry other tiny tweaks – including barely discernible differences between sound effects for the two *Bayonetta* models, and a facelift for Wii Fit Trainer. But then *Smash* has always been about the nerdy details, and if Sakurai is bored of the series it certainly didn't show – though one could surmise that his enthusiasm may have had something to do with the knowledge that, in all likelihood, he won't have to make another one after this.



LET'S GO, PIKACHU & EEVEE

Developer Game Freak **Publisher** Nintendo, The Pokémon Company **Format** Switch **Release** November 16

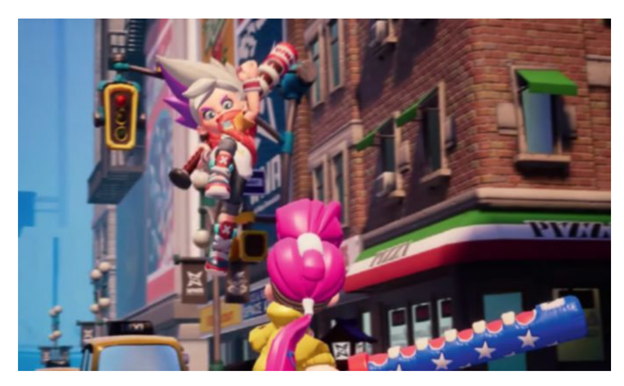
Pitched as "a Pokémon for everyone" – as if previous entries were somehow off-puttingly arcane – this isn't the home-console RPG many were hoping for. Rather, it's a hybrid of the handheld games and *Pokémon Go*, no doubt intended as a kind of gateway drug to full-fat *Pokémon* for those who've only played the mobile game. It's a sound concept, and no doubt the sales figures will be absurd, but after a brief stroll through Viridian Forest we're left with the uneasy feeling that *Let's Go* is a dilution of both games.

The place is certainly busier than before, that's for sure. The layout will be familiar to those who played *Pokémon Yellow* (or *Red/Blue* for that matter) but the patches of long grass are swarming with beasts and bugs: wriggling Caterpies and Weedles, hopping Metapods and Kakunas, and the odd wandering Pikachu. Pidgeys, meanwhile, flap around overhead, bumping into you and prompting a battle – except it's not actually a battle, but a capture opportunity. As in *Pokémon Go*, your aim is to try to land a Pokéball inside a narrowing circle to increase your chances of a catch; like Niantic's game, you can also feed berries to a target. Any experience gained is shared between your current party.

Yet if anything, the process is even less involved, the Joy-Con gestures lacking the nuance of *Go*'s touchscreen controls (undocked mode uses gyro controls in a slightly different way). It feels a little more natural while using the Poké Ball Plus controller, which sits snugly in the hand, although it's smaller than we'd anticipated. We had some issues getting button-presses to register, too – this was, in fairness, a prototype unit – but the way it uses lights, sounds and HD rumble to convey the idea that a living thing is inside is quietly ingenious, and sure to delight younger players especially.

That the best thing about Let's Go is an optional (and expensive) peripheral says a lot

That the best thing about *Let's Go* is an optional (and expensive) peripheral says a lot. It all looks oddly sterile, increasing the resolution of the 3DS games but losing some of their character. If the fauna is lively, the trainers you'll encounter stand as still as they always did, waiting for you to cross their line of sight before strolling up to challenge you to a battle. A co-op mode lets a second player join in by simply shaking a Joy-Con, with experience bonuses for coordinated captures, but this hardly recaptures the social elements that helped *Go* blow up. That producer Junichi Masuda felt moved to announce that we'd be getting a more traditional *Pokémon* RPG late next year seems instructive: perhaps even Game Freak isn't convinced that this worryingly simplistic game really is a *Pokémon* for everyone.



NINJALA

Developer/publisher GungHo
Format Switch **Release** 2019

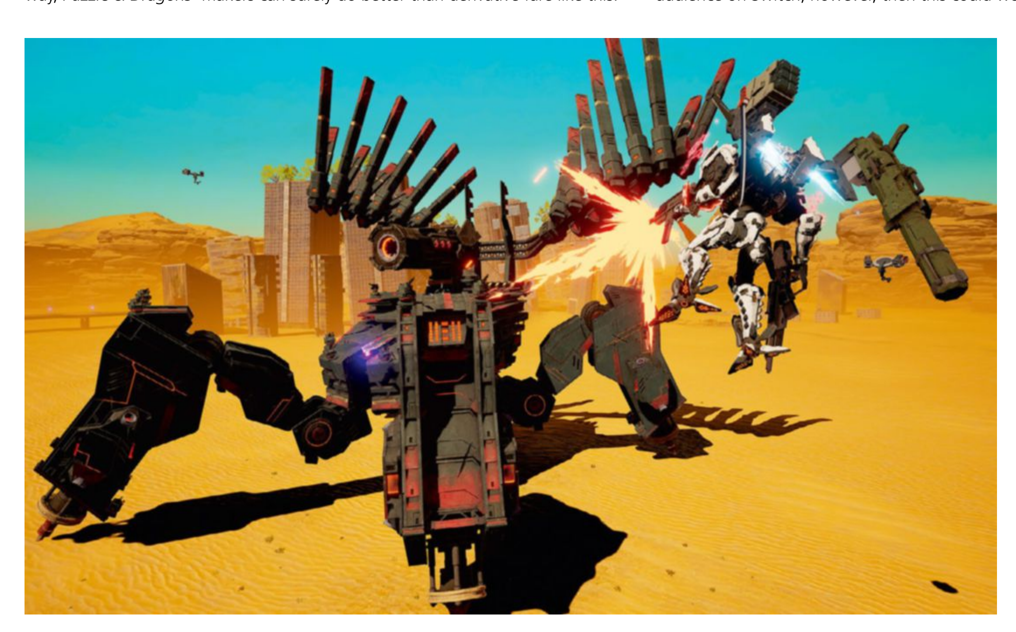
It might almost share a name with *Arms*' most grab-happy fighter, but you barely need to give GungHo's latest a passing glance to see what inspired it. As a multiplayer action game featuring youngsters battling with unconventional weapons in bright urban settings, it could hardly be more brazen about its debt to *Splatoon*. In fairness, its central gum-blowing mechanic – the bigger the bubble, the larger the weapon you'll produce – gives it a distinctive hook, but we sense the giant inflatable baseball bats the publisher was giving away drew more crowds than the game itself. There is, we suppose, a logic to its existence given *Splatoon*'s popularity – though surely it would make more sense for GungHo to target platforms on which the real thing was unavailable? Either way, *Puzzle & Dragons'* makers can surely do better than derivative fare like this.



KILLER QUEEN BLACK

Developer Bumblebear Games **Publisher** Liquid Bit
Format Switch **Release** March 2019

A refurbished version of a cult arcade game all your cool friends will claim to have played, *Killer Queen Black* fuses platforming and strategy in a captivatingly singular package. The 2013 original was a five-on-five game; this Switch version supports two teams of four, who must work together to earn one of three kinds of tactical victory. As with *Civilization* you can triumph economically, here achieved by using your three drone characters to retrieve a dozen berries. More patient players can ride a slithering snail across the screen, or power up to transform into warrior units, capable of killing the titular queen on the opposing team. Chaotic and immediate, but with room for devious, skilful play, it's the kind of game we fear might work best at busy events; if it does find an audience on Switch, however, then this could well be a future party classic.



DAEMON X MACHINA

Developer Marvelous, First Studio **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** 2019

You'd have got fairly long odds on Nintendo's E3 Direct opening with an urgent metal soundtrack and giant cel-shaded mechs battling it out against a blood-red sky. But it's absolutely a compliment to Marvelous that we briefly suspected PlatinumGames might have been behind this energetic action game. With no sign of From reviving *Armored Core* any time soon, this could well be the next best thing; indeed, producer Kenichiro Tsukuda and mecha concept artist Shoji Kawamori are both series regulars, while character designer Yusuke Kozaki has worked on the likes of *Ouendan* and *Puzzle & Dragons*. In other words, this team knows what it's doing.

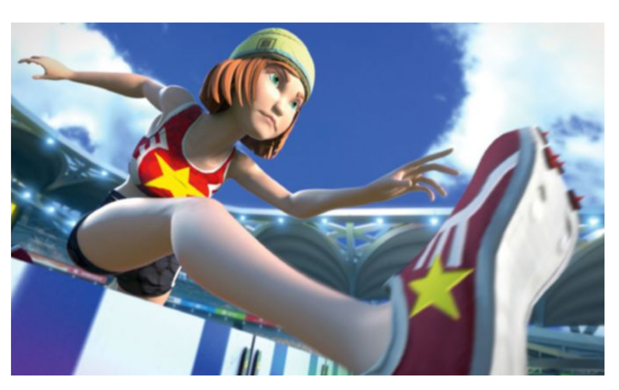
It shows, too. This was a confident debut for a game that seems a little more immediate than *Armored Core*, but no less intense. The vibrant palette and driving score lend extra drama to encounters, while the ability to change your loadout on the fly by picking up arms from defeated enemies allows you to adapt to shifting threats. There's an improvisational spontaneity to the action: you can destroy tanks by flying out of their firing range and bringing nearby buildings down on top of them, while wrecked cars can be picked up and hurled at targets. It may not be out until next year, but in a disappointing show from its publisher this was a handsome, exciting standout.



MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS ULTIMATE

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format Switch **Release** August 28

A year on from its Japanese release, Capcom has finally done the decent thing. For those who haven't been keeping count, this is a visually enhanced version of the Japan-only 3DS game, *Monster Hunter XX*, which in turn was an expanded version of *Monster Hunter X*, localised for the west as *Monster Hunter Generations*. If you have a character and save game from *Generations*, you can transfer it over to this, letting you get to the good stuff quicker. After *World*, it might take some players a little while to reacclimatise to the old ways – and to the visual downgrade, for that matter – but this does have a much larger roster of beasts, with over a dozen classic monsters that didn't feature in *Generations*, along with two brand new creatures (elder dragon Valstrax and the striking, mantis-like Ahtal-Ka) and a selection of deviant variants besides.



HYPER SPORTS R

Developer/publisher Konami
Format Switch **Release** TBA

Following the surprising success of *Super Bomberman R* – which is, we concede, in better shape now than at launch – Konami is back to exhume another old favourite for Switch. It's clearly designed to fill a *Wii Sports*-shaped gap: the 100m sprint involves holding a Joy-Con in each hand and moving your arms up and down. You can use more traditional controls, holding the Joy-Con sideways, while hammering the left- and rightmost buttons. The long jump, meanwhile, appropriates the original's control scheme, though the javelin throw has been tweaked, with an over-the-shoulder perspective and a moving reticle that you need to centre before you let fly. It feels slightly cut-price – there's still time to sand off its rough edges, though the charmless art style is unlikely to change – but with little direct competition, a podium finish seems inevitable.



FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

Developer Intelligent Systems **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** Spring 2019

For a new entry in a series whose popularity has spiked in recent years, this had a surprisingly low-key presence. *Awakening* and *Fates* might have brought the series to wider attention, but visually at least, this has more in common with two other *Fire Emblem* games. Its muted palette and character design is redolent of recent 3DS remake *Shadows Of Valentia*, while the battles resemble Omega Force's *Warriors* spin-off, as each unit is joined by a small cabal of soldiers, all equipped with the same weapon as their leader.

We're sad to see the back of the 2D sprites from the 3DS games, but the battle transitions are now much smoother, and there are plenty of UI improvements besides. Red, arcing lines drawn between rival units and your own let you know which ones are most likely to be attacked next, while a new mid-range perspective presents a handy grid that can display all nearby weapon or terrain types, letting you find the most tactically advantageous positions at a glance. Weapon durability returns – a decision that will likely be cheered and jeered in equal measure – while you'll be able to stage mock battles to train up units, and explore a castle town between skirmishes. There's potential for greatness here, but this was a rather muted introduction.



SUPER MARIO PARTY

Developer Nd Cube **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** October 5

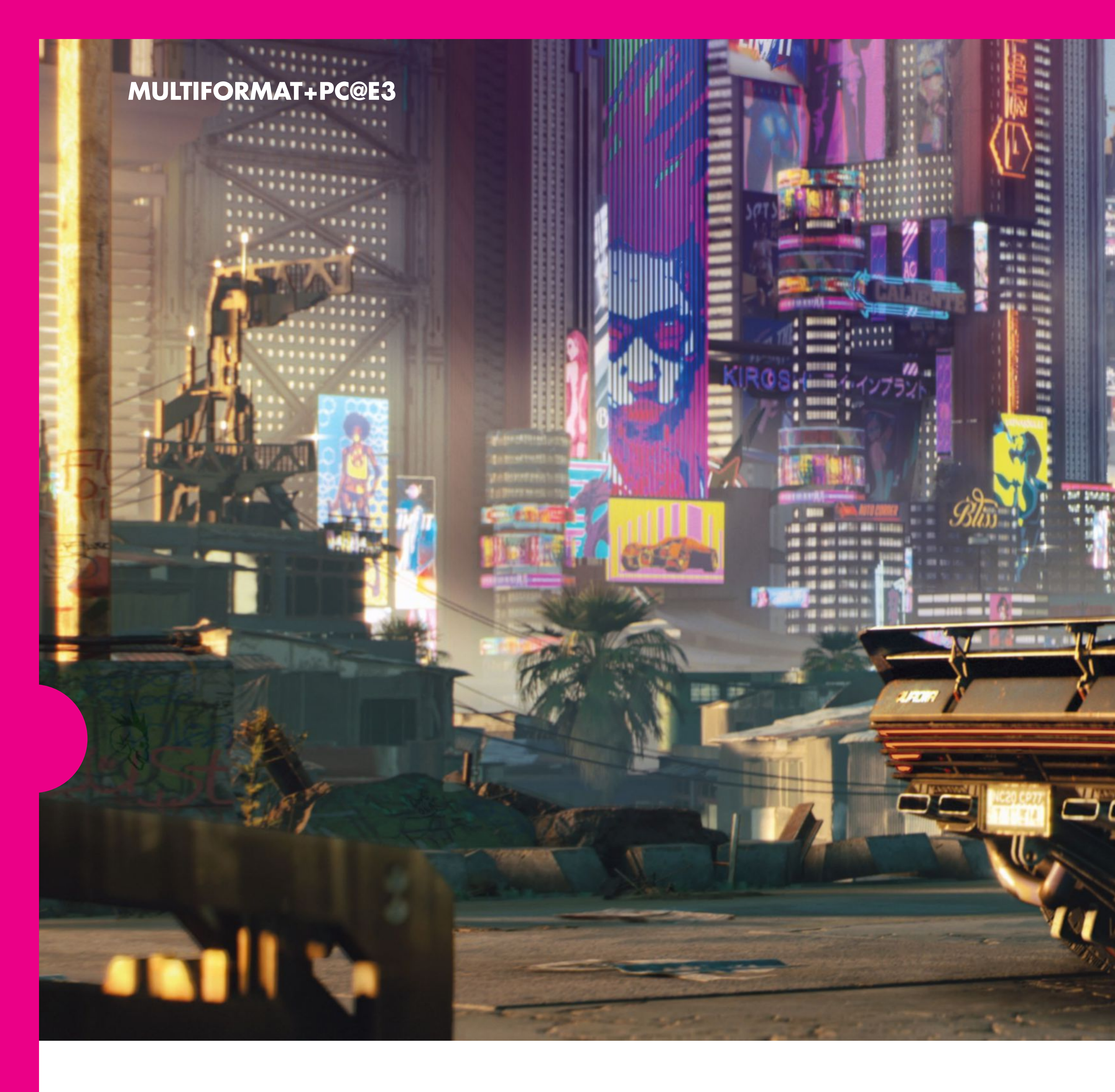
Nintendo, it's fair to say, has had better E3s: when your creative highlight is a *Mario Party* game, something's gone pretty badly wrong. But perhaps we're doing Nd Cube a disservice. It may not be our favourite Nintendo series, but this is the first entry since the developer took over from Hudson Soft that offers something we truly haven't seen before. Within Toad's Rec Room, you'll find a series of activities that support two screens: rearranging them to line up bunches of bananas may only be a fleeting novelty, but it's a pleasing one all the same. Better still is a 2v2 tank battle, which lets you select two halves of a map before connecting them by swiping across both displays. In doing so, you can simply increase the size of the play space, or arrange them in a T or L-shape to bottleneck the action. As with *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* and *Zelda: Four Swords Adventures*, it's creative and fun, but issues of cost and convenience will naturally limit its audience.

It's not the only attempt to shake up a series that has been coasting since its N64 heyday. Cooperative mode Partner Party offers free movement around a more open board, with elements of light strategy reminiscent of *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle*: pass through your opponents' spaces and you'll stomp on them to steal their coins. Collaborative minigames invite you to work together, and if you succeed you're encouraged to celebrate with a high-five by swinging your Joy-Cons in time.

Elsewhere, it's business as usual, though the car in which characters travelled together in recent entries has been consigned to the scrapyard. Instead, each player has a choice between regular and character-specific dice: Mario's die has three threes, while the more volatile Bowser can move 10 spaces with a lucky roll, or lose coins with an unfortunate one. Of the 80 available minigames, there are already a few standouts: the riotous Slaparazzi is a free-for-all to get the prime spot in a group photo, while Sizzling Stakes has you toss a cube of meat in a pan to cook all sides, the Joy-Con rumbling to confirm a job well-done.

It's the first Mario Party to feature online play – though, this being Nintendo, there's a caveat

It's also, somewhat belatedly, the first *Mario Party* to feature online play – though, this being Nintendo, there's an inevitable caveat. The standard boardgame mode will remain available to local players only; online players can instead compete in a five-minigame Mario-thon, which comes with a ranking system and leaderboards. But *Mario Party* is always most at home among family and friends, and with its handful of inventive flourishes there's every chance this will become a festive-season favourite.



CYBERPUNK 2077

Developer/publisher CD Projekt Red **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Our demo of *Cyberpunk 2077* is on the second day of the show, and word has clearly got around. In among the usual crowd of journalists and retail buyers we spot a couple of studio heads, a creative director or two and some cast members from a certain Netflix series. It is E3's hottest ticket, and 45 minutes later we understand why. The demo ends and the room explodes with spontaneous applause. They know they've seen something special.

We first saw *Cyberpunk 2077* a few months after its announcement, when we visited CD Projekt Red for our cover story on *The Witcher III* (**E**255). It was a boardgame made out of Post-It notes. Now, it offers a tantalising glimpse of the future of videogames.

It's a masterpiece of demo making, too, setting the scene and the stakes while elegantly burying the lede – it takes 20 minutes for protagonist V to finally step out into a bustling, beautiful, impossibly

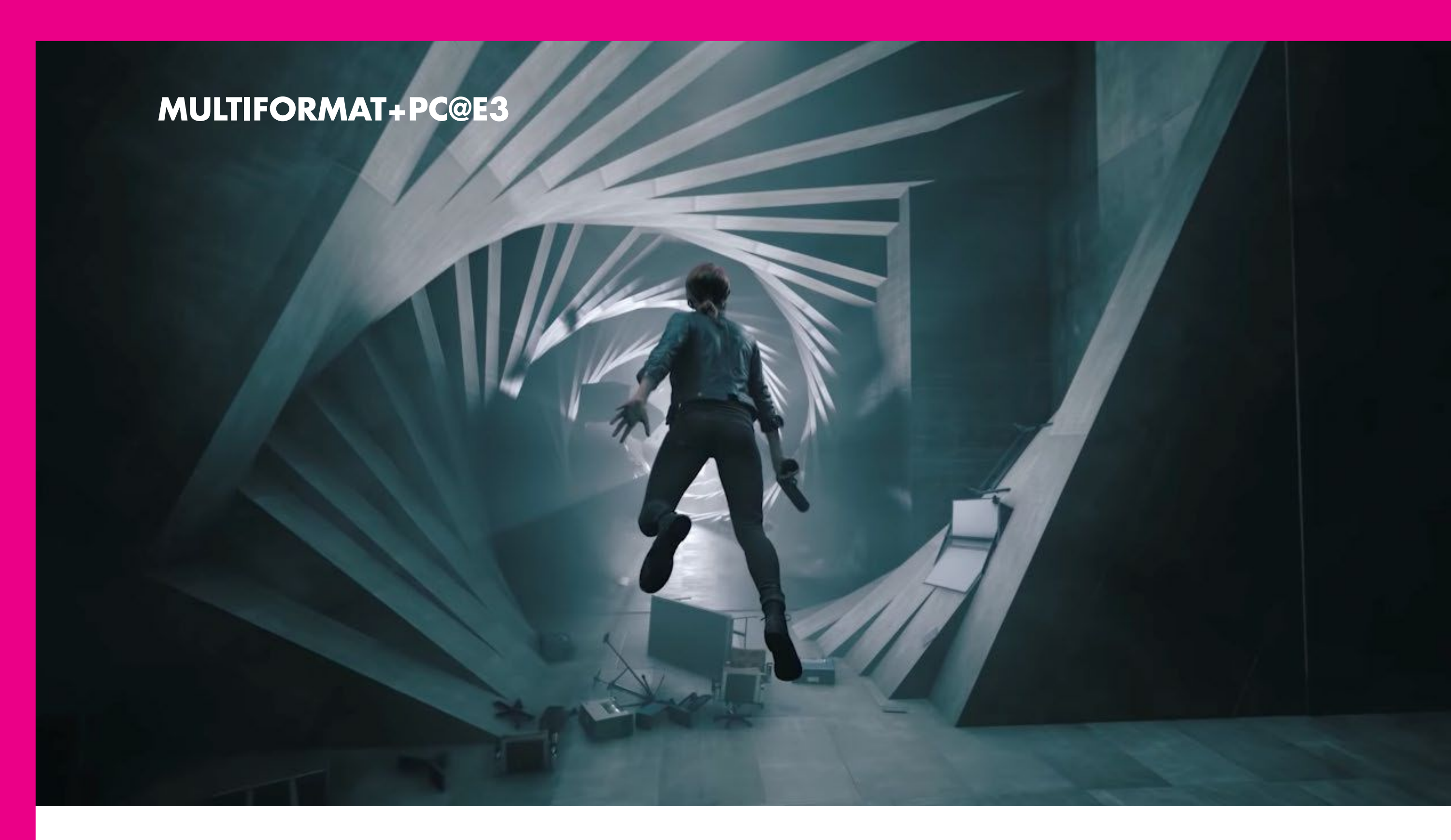


You'll get around by car, though the driving section in our demo is no point-to-point trek; we're assailed by bandits, sparking a shootout while your partner takes the wheel

detailed sci-fi cityscape. By the time it finally happens we've been introduced, at length, to the game's firstperson combat. This has caused some concern among *Witcher* fans, who assumed *Cyberpunk* would also be played in thirdperson. But the benefits here are clear. Firstperson is better for drinking in the most lavishly crafted videogame world we've ever seen. It also means certain skills, abilities and HUD elements can be made part of your character; V buys an optical augment from a backstreet doctor which lets her zoom in on scenery and shows lore info and statistics on objects and characters.

Yet the main beneficiary is combat, and the studio quickly proves itself an able FPS developer, with an RPG-maker's eye for how sci-fi guns should work. A tech shotgun's bullets can penetrate cover or be charged up for extra damage. Rifle bullets can be bounced off walls, a dotted line showing the trajectory. Others have projectiles that track their targets. It's remarkable stuff, and looks beautiful.

It's a gorgeous game, but it's the level of detail and craft of the world – a smaller landmass than *The Witcher III*, though with much more elevation and a far greater density – that really sticks out. Fans may pine for Geralt, but a custom character, with selectable traits and backstory that affect how your fellow citizens react to you, is a tantalising prospect. However, while CDPR says the game is currently slated for release on today's consoles, getting this running on them is going to take something approaching witchcraft. This is our first look at the next generation of games. And it can't come soon enough.



CONTROL

Developer Remedy Entertainment **Publisher** 505 Games **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

We watch the ritual with a sense of awe, curiosity and relief: finally, Remedy is weird again. The *good* kind of weird – not the 'videogame intercut with several dull episodes of a mainstream television series' kind of weird. *Control* is a thirdperson action game seen through a distorted lens, subtly shifting shape every minute we spend looking at it.

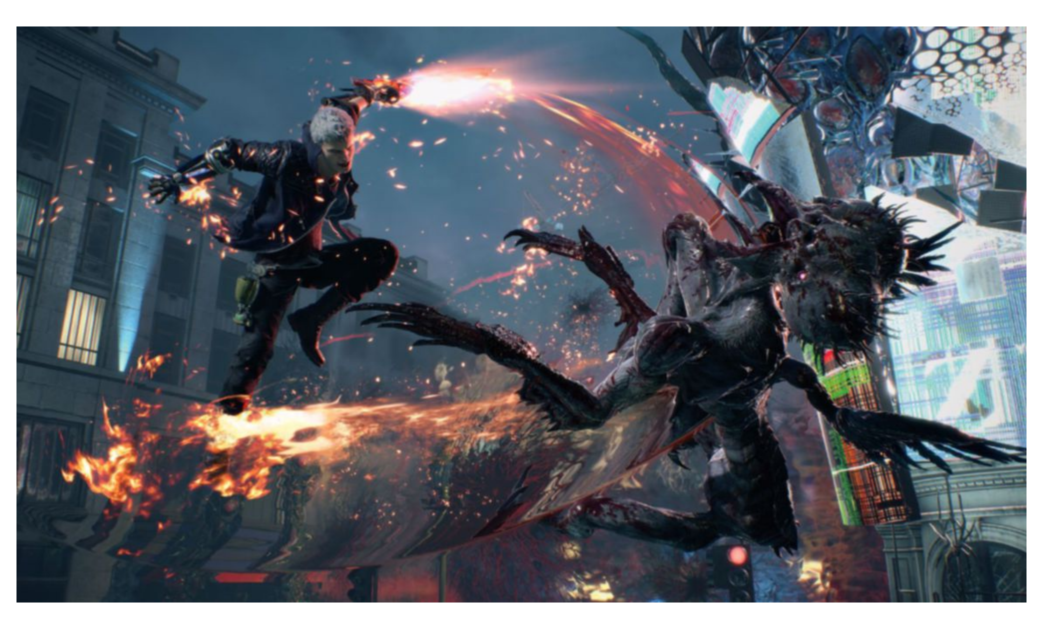
The premise is simple enough at first. Our hero, Jesse Faden, has come to the headquarters of the Federal Bureau Of Control (a secret government agency out to thwart a malevolent force known as the Hiss and find Objects Of Power) to step into her new role as director. It soon transpires, however, that the process won't be as easy as sticking a new nameplate on her desk. The Brutalist walls of her new office, The Oldest House, have a strange habit of altering themselves.

Through 'ritual attunements', Faden is able to navigate the impossible inter-dimensional hallways. The rituals aren't puzzles, as such – they're far from logical. Hitting a lightswitch a certain number of times, for instance, warps the archway before it into a path through the building. Faden's customisable loadout of supernatural powers opens up new avenues, too: we're told that *Control* owes a heavy debt to the Metroidvania, with a Levitate ability (which is unusually delicate in its animation, Faden teetering and treading invisible water as she hovers) granting access to some of the building's seemingly unreachable areas.

Missions are structured around hub spaces instead of levels, with bizarre sidequests spiralling off down dark corridors. The opposition you're fighting – which has an unsettling predilection for appearing as corpse-like beings suspended in mid-air – are just as capable as Faden, possessing the very same powers. Faden can use telekinesis to fling an abandoned forklift their way, but they can give as good as they get, which makes your ability to summon a shield of floating rubble essential. And then there's the gun. The Service Weapon is a beautiful bit of design, a pistol seemingly composed of magnets that shift and spin into disarray when it's fired – sometimes backwards over Faden's shoulder – evaporating enemies into an oil-slick shimmer of rainbow.

> Control is a thirdperson action game seen through a distorted lens, shifting shape every minute

Having once belonged to the previous director, the gun is a modern spin on the legend of Excalibur, we're told. Arthurian legend was the last thing we expected to be referenced in a game which also features a man in a holding cell being forced to stare at a refrigerator lest it 'deviate' – and according to our demo handler, on the weirdness scale, we ain't seen nothing yet. Rest assured, Remedy, that you have our full attention.



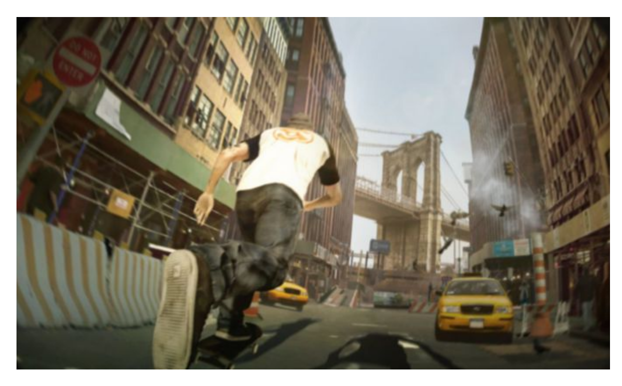
DEVIL MAY CRY 5

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Q1

One online wag observed that Capcom's solution to the Dante problem – series fans *really* didn't like Ninja Theory's interpretation of DMC's star – was to design the new one as a combination of the Japanese and UK Dantes, and thus please no one. Weirdly, though, that isn't even Dante in the trailer; it's Nero, joint protagonist of *DMC4*, who these days is running a demon-hunting business out of his Transit van. We've all been there.

There's no uproar this time, however, chiefly because Hideaki Itsuno, director of *DMC*s *2*, *3* and *4*, is back at the helm. Itsuno's new game is a direct sequel to *Devil May Cry 4*, and revolves around Nero's mechanical prosthetic arm, the Devil Breaker. The trailer hints, a little worryingly, at the van being a weapon as well as an office – a feeling that intensifies when that Dante shows up at the end on a motorbike, his silver curtains flapping in the breeze like a screamo Daryl Dixon.

Itsuno's earned the benefit of the doubt, however, and we'll find out more at Gamescom in August, where *Devil May Cry 5* will be playable. In the meantime, details are scant: Itsuno has let a few things slip – the music now builds and swells when you rack up style combos, for instance – but for now the only thing that matters is that *Devil May Cry* is back, and this time, praise be, no one seems particularly cross about it.

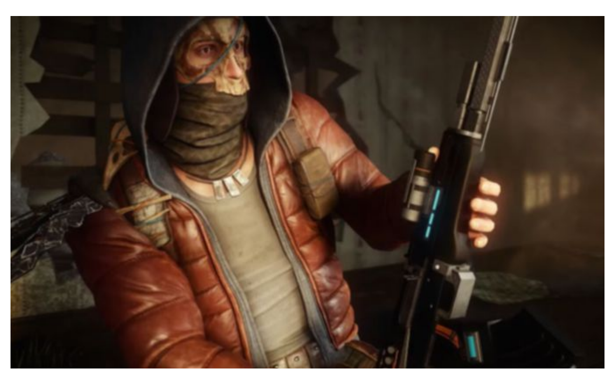


SESSION

Developer/publisher Crea-ture Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

It's okay, we thought it was *Skate 4* too. In fact, it's something better. Lord knows what EA would do with a skateboarding game in the era of cosmetic microtransactions and loot boxes; *Session*, however, is being made with pure intentions out of a sincere love of the sport. Creative director Marc-André Houde has been skating since he was eight, and his game, which soared past its Kickstarter goal last November, is a purist's dream. The analogue sticks control one foot each, with analogue triggers used to shift your character's weight.

It's hard to get your head around, at least at first, but then so is the sport on which it's based. The structure is the stuff of skater fantasy, too, with levels based on real-world cities featuring legendary spots as well as developer-created ones. The team will modify unpopular spots based on player feedback.



MAVERICKS: PROVING GROUNDS

Developer Automaton **Publisher** Improbable
Format PC **Release** 2018

Focus on the loot all you want, but stealth is part of the fun of the battle royale too. *Mavericks: Proving Grounds* takes tracking down the advantage to new extremes: powered by Improbable's SpatialOS tech, a detailed map means that a player's impact on the environment is persistent. Bullet casings, blood trails and used med kits provide obvious clues, but eagle eyes can even study muddy footprints and displaced foliage – although wildlife throws up red herrings. After the initial announcement of an ambitious 1,000-player mode, we assumed *Mavericks* would be just another ill-advised attempt to cash in on a phenomenon. But in promising a full MMO with NPCs, quest lines and even a *Destiny*-esque social hub with the help of Improbable's considerable capabilities, this young development team could be building the future of battle royale.



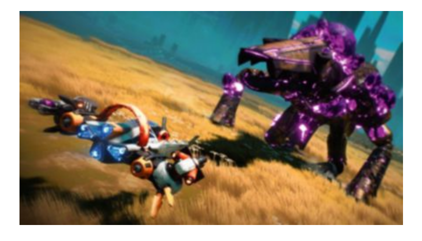
FALLOUT 76

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 14

As elevator pitches go, '*Fallout*, but online' is the sort of immediately understandable no-brainer that would have studio execs reaching for their chequebooks. But it's been a far tougher task for Bethesda than you might think. The Gamebryo engine wasn't exactly built with multiplayer games in mind – we'll avoid the obvious joke here, thanks – and neither is the studio itself. Thankfully, Bethesda's an increasingly broad church these days, and its Austin dev operation, formerly known as Battlecry Studios, has successfully modified Gamebryo to support online play.

The problems don't end there, however, and series fans are unconvinced by the decisions Bethesda has made to turn *Fallout* from a singleplayer RPG into a shared-world one. Okay, the map is bigger – four times the size of *Fallout 4*'s – but it will feel emptier, since there are no human NPCs: Bethesda wants you to know that if you hear gunfire or see someone in the distance, it's another player. But it will rob the world of a certain something.

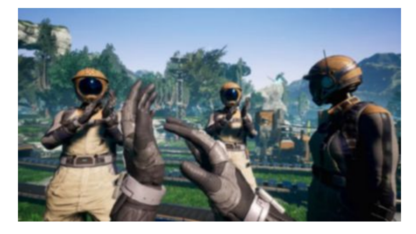
So too will the nuke system Todd Howard outlined during Bethesda's E3 stage show. Beneath the ground lie huge, batlike creatures, known as Scorchbeasts. From time to time they'll rise to the surface, and players must work together to find a set of nuclear launch codes with which to destroy them. The irradiated area will spawn high-level enemies that drop powerful gear and materials. It's perhaps a little too bonkers an idea for a series that, for all its occasional daftness, has always traded on seeming plausible.



STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Toronto)
Format PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** October 16

We sensed that the Starlink team were sitting on something exciting during our visit to the Ubisoft Toronto studio. It turns out that something was an Arwing – which, on reflection, explains the uncomfortable fidgeting. Yes, Fox McCloud will appear as a character in *Starlink: Battle For Atlas*, complete with his own collectible statue and ship. He and various other *Star Fox* characters are Switch-only, naturally, and bring with them exclusive missions. We've voiced our concerns about the strength of the characters that Ubisoft hopes to hang its new IP off; this will undoubtedly help sales, especially as players can opt to buy a Star Fox Starter Pack that includes everything needed to play and complete *Starlink* – as well as a figure of poster boy-turned-afterthought Mason, and the digital-only version of his ship.



SATISFACTORY

Developer/publisher Coffee Stain Studios
Format PC **Release** TBA

You certainly can't accuse Coffee Stain Studios of resting on its laurels. The Swedish studio has made, among others, the tower-defence-FPS hybrid *Sanctum* and the bonkers meme-game *Goat Simulator*. *Satisfactory* is another sharp creative turn from them, and is much more than a clever pun.

It's a factory-building game set in a vast sci-fi world, that began life as a base-defence game before Coffee Stain realised that the build was more satisfying than the process of defending it. You'll still face threats out in the world – in addition to setting up your creation and successfully automating your production processes, you're also tasked with exploring new lands for resources, dealing with aggressive inhabitants and establishing outposts for fast travel. *Goat Sim* had its moments, but we rather prefer Coffee Stain in serious mode.



WATTAM

Developer Funomena **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PS4 **Release** 2018

It's laziness to simply label *Wattam* bonkers. It absolutely is, of course – creator Keita Takahashi has a wonderful surrealist sense of humour – but the childlike brilliance of his latest has plenty of not-so-hidden depth. A new demo has us exploring *Wattam*'s summertime section. A lonely island is desperate for an ocean, so off goes the Mayor to fetch a mischievous onion from the springtime world, which waggles itself underneath the island's face upon our instruction, making it cry a sea of salty tears. Happy island; problem solved. *Wattam* shows us the magic of communication and friendship through a lens of disarming weirdness, at once parable and playground. Bonkers, then, but also making a comforting sort of sense – a mad, beautiful picture of what our world could look like, anthropomorphic toilets and all.



HITMAN 2

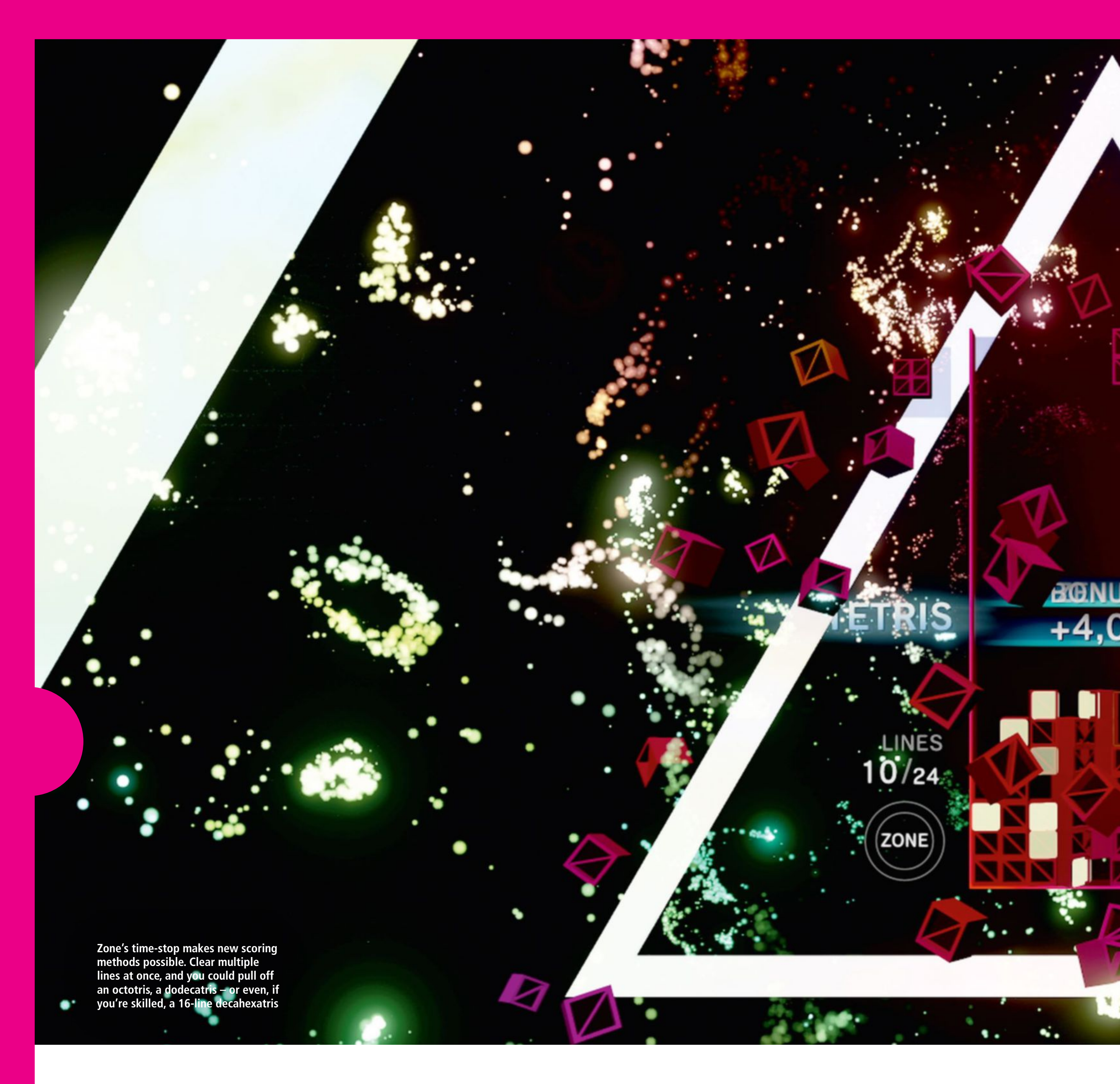
Developer IO Interactive **Publisher** Warner Bros **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 13

When it comes to the timeworn act of videogame assassinations, the *Hitman* games have long offered an unrivalled level of creative freedom. Yet for every player enthralled by IO Interactive's little clockwork murder boxes, many more are deterred. It is a niche idea made, with near immaculate craft, for a certain type of player – one who thrives upon a lack of direction, who pokes at the puzzle until it reveals itself. To others it is like being sat down in front of Spotify and being asked to put some music on, finding themselves paralysed by freedom of choice. Well, they should have played *Hitman 2* at E3, where our demo handler would, if you wanted, give you a realtime walkthrough of an entire level. They should bundle this with the special edition. They'd make a fortune.

The game unfurls when played like this, and when it's laid out in front of us we see that, in fact, little has changed in raw gameplay terms. This is more of the same, which is all it needs to be. The big changes have come behind the scenes. Square Enix, publisher of the 2016 game, parted company with IO earlier this year, letting the Danish studio retain the IP rights to the series which had become its trademark in every sense but the legal one. The 2016 game's experimental episodic structure reaped dividends in terms of letting the studio improve later episodes based on feedback it received on the earlier ones – and it was IO's idea rather than Square's, despite what the Internet rumour mill might tell you – but sales suffered. The sequel will be published by new partner Warner Bros as a full, six-level game, and expanded upon in the months following release.

> It is a niche idea made for a certain type of player – one who thrives upon a lack of direction

Our demo's setting is a riot of colour, set trackside at a lavish motorsport event that feels deliberately designed to make you feel like Agent 47 is infiltrating a *Forza Horizon* festival. Your mark, Sierra Knox, is the daughter of a powerful and nefarious arms dealer – and she's a superstar driver, her map marker doing laps around the circuit while you do your less glamorous, but no less graceful work in the shadows nearby. We can't resist knocking out a mascot – when else are we ever going to get the chance to gatecrash a VIP section in a flamingo suit? – but we'll soon pose as a waiter in order to spike a grumpy mechanic's drink with rat poison, then use his uniform to deliver the killing blow, attaching a remote explosive to Knox's ride during a pit stop. A sizzle reel after the kill shows the smorgasbord of alternative options in a game that, this time, we hope will get the sales figures its mechanics have long deserved.



Zone's time-stop makes new scoring methods possible. Clear multiple lines at once, and you could pull off an octotris, a dodecatris – or even, if you're skilled, a 16-line decahexatris

TETRIS EFFECT

Developer/publisher Enhance Games **Format** PS4, PSVR **Release** Autumn

What's it like? Well, pretty much exactly what you think it is: *Tetris*, as viewed through the lens of *Rez* and *Lumines*, in VR. And it's as every bit as wonderful as it sounds. *Tetris Effect* is an intriguing proposition on paper, and an irresistible one in practice, Tetsuya Mizuguchi combining the things he's learned about music games, puzzle games and virtual reality to form a terrific spin on one of the most famous names in all of gaming.

So, yes, blocks fall while ethereal electronic music plays in the background. Rotating a piece as it falls triggers a sound effect; another plays when a block falls into place, and another still if it forms a complete line. It's immediately familiar, and so we quickly drift into that familiar space that only Mizuguchi's games really occupy: halfway between genre standard and performance piece, equal parts puzzle game and DJ set, our rotations and drops and clearances held back to

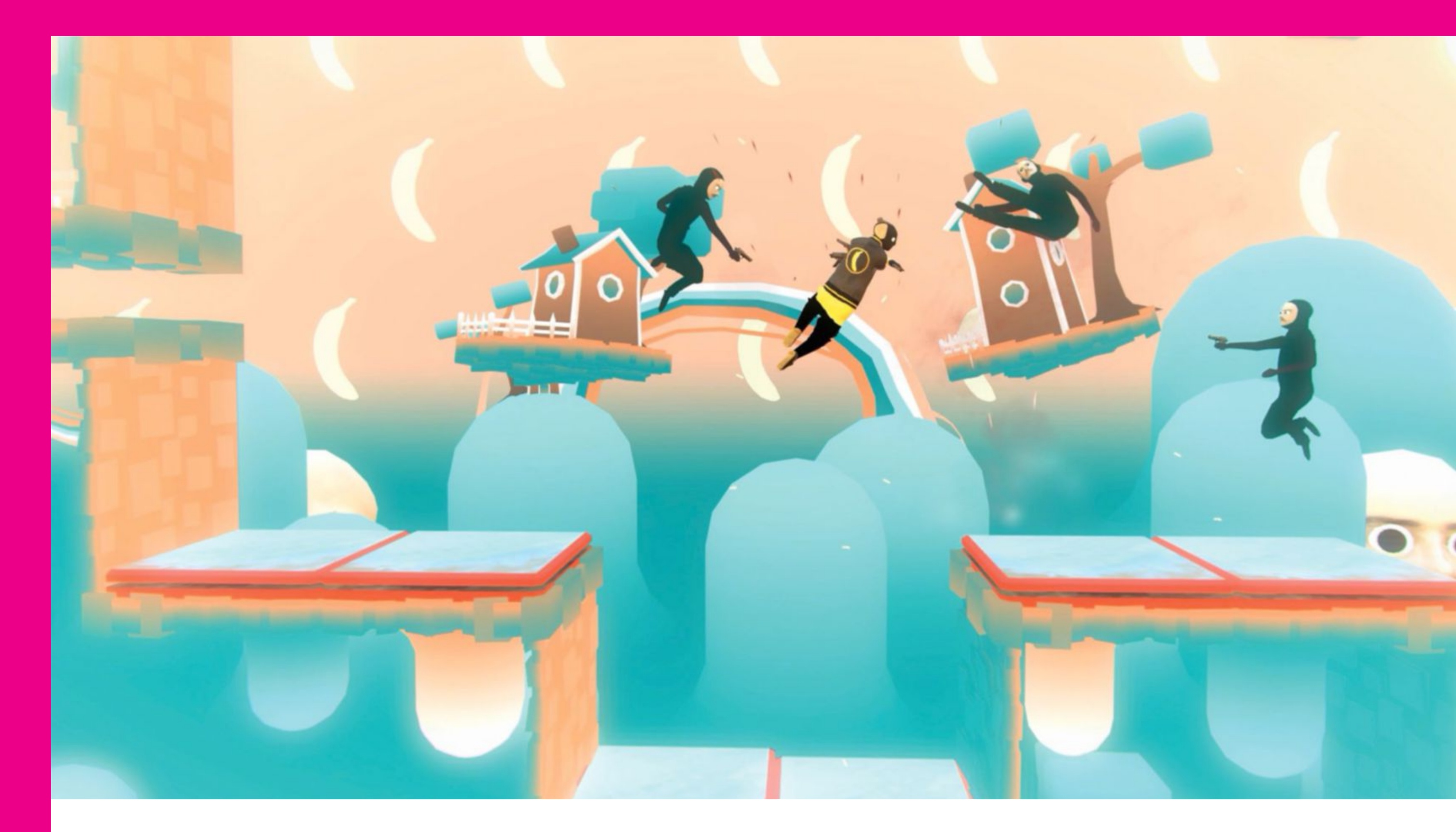


sync up with kickdrums and snares. There's a tinge of disappointment when we discover there's no bespoke sound effect for holding a D-pad direction until a block hits the sides of the play area, as in *Lumines*. But then we enter Zone mode, and all is forgiven.

Zone is activated using a meter that you fill up by clearing lines. Trigger it and the music changes, the beat falling away as the action freezes in time, giving you a few seconds to clear as many lines as you can. We quickly realise we're using it wrong; it feels like we'd be better off saving it for either a troubled board, or one that's only a few well-placed blocks away from a big payday. And the fact that the music falls away, rather than kicking into a higher gear, means the more musically inclined will need to think carefully about how to use it, too.

The board itself is set surprisingly far away from you, whether played on VR or a TV. The need for comfort in VR might be a factor in that, but it's largely a stylistic decision, allowing Mizuguchi and team to put on a light show on the boundaries.

Within the play area, *Tetris Effect* follows *Lumines*' structure, the skin and backing track changing every few minutes. There's a story mode, if you can call it that, though Enhance sees the alternative, as-yet-unannounced modes as the game's long tail. VR and puzzle games might seem an odd fit – especially from the maker of *Lumines*, in which a single game could last for hours on end. But this is as comfortable a VR game as we've played, and one with an irresistible hook. Another instant classic from a man whose career is full of them.



MY FRIEND PEDRO

Developer Deadtoast Entertainment **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, Switch **Release** 2019

Presumably there are only so many games about cheerful little mascots you can make before you start getting the urge to have a really good go on some guns for a bit. At least, that seems to be the case for former Media Molecule level designer Victor Ågren: having worked on *LittleBigPlanet* and *Tearaway*, he's now the sole developer on *My Friend Pedro*, a 2D shooter where you play as a balaclava-wearing hoodlum compelled to commit mass murder by an imaginary banana.

Each level pits you and your creativity against a building full of goons. While we can jump off walls, roll under furniture and split our aiming of our twin pistols using the left trigger, our enemies aren't the athletic type and remain almost stationary targets – albeit ones that shoot back if not dealt with quickly – meaning each new room becomes a new opportunity to pull off some flashy manoeuvres. And our jolly yellow friend grants us another advantage: the power to slow down time.

We can jump off walls, roll under furniture and split our aiming of our twin pistols using the left trigger

The automatically recharging meter for it is, thankfully, extremely generous. Ågren is keen for players to have fun, he tells us, instead of fretting about how much bullet time they have left. And, at least in these first few levels, both are in abundance. In one room, we first bounce off an enemy torso and then a wall before activating slow-motion and flipping above a group of goons, splitting our aim for a double kill. In the next, we kick a pan up to the floor above us before firing at it and watching bullets ricochet into unsuspecting bodies. Later, a dangerous situation is turned to our advantage when we remember we can spin to dodge incoming fire, hugging our pistols close as we shoot back while pirouetting – before kicking a nearby kitchen knife into the only survivor's face. The banana smiles.

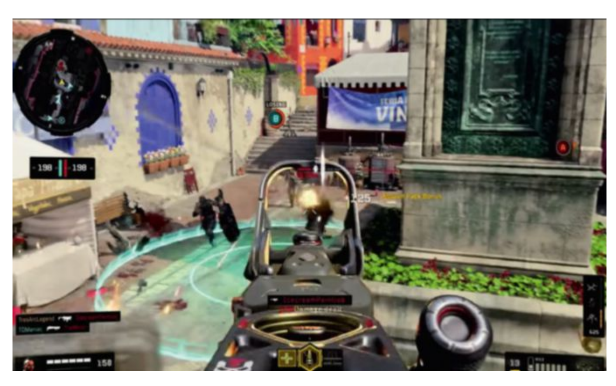
The concluding boss fight sits us astride a motorcycle for a cinematic chase scene, and feels somewhat limited next to the ridiculous ultraviolent choreography of *My Friend Pedro*'s other levels. This is a game in which you can dangle upside-down from a rope and headshot two guys simultaneously before somersaulting onto a skateboard to ride and then kickflip into someone's head. It's a game that is difficult to describe in one breath, but that can be accurately defined by a feature that identifies your finest moment in each level and, at the end, presents you with a GIF that can be instantly shared to Twitter. It's a particularly gruesome version of it, sure, but there's plenty of the 'Play, create, share' mantra in this savagely accomplished shooter: it seems Ågren's years at Media Molecule have served him very well.



TWIN MIRROR

Developer Dontnod **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

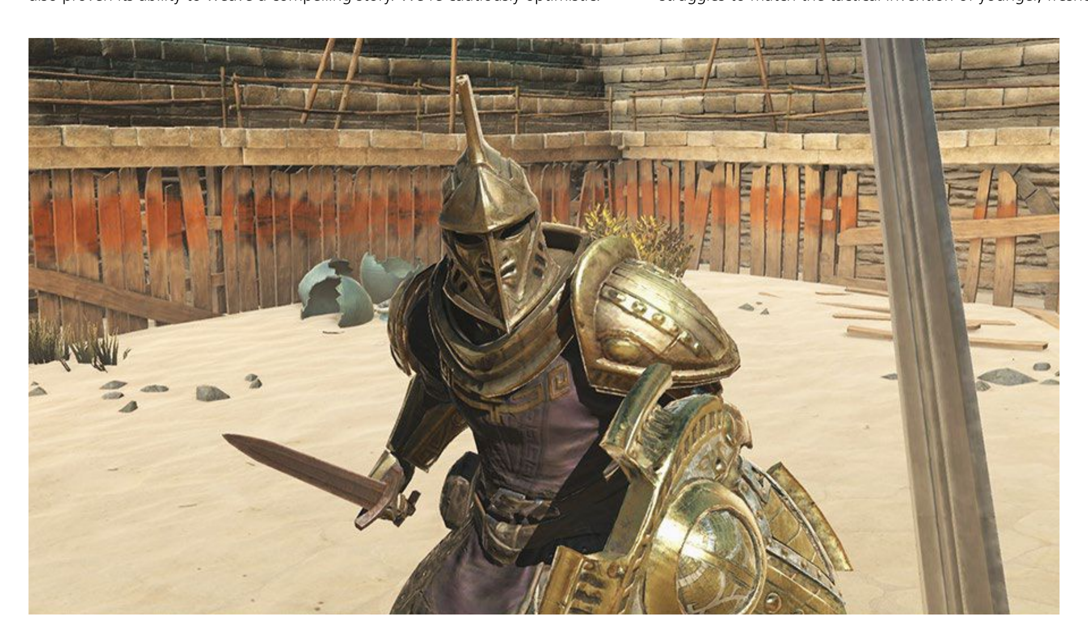
Dontnod has been busy. Besides the just-released *Vampyr* and forthcoming *Life Is Strange 2*, here is *Twin Mirror*, a choice-based thriller which bears a striking resemblance to Quantic Dream's fare. The trailer introduces protagonist Sam – come home to Basswood, West Virginia, for a friend's funeral – in a scene reminiscent of *Fahrenheit*'s opening sequence, as he wakes to discover his shirt bloody, the mystery set to unravel from there. And the uncanny similarities with David Cage's games continue: clichéd dialogue, a supernatural dreamscape and a flash of Sam punching a ghostly apparition. The marketing line, too, about this being a tale where "the line between truth and deception is blurred" is groan-worthy – but while Dontnod has a track record of hamming things up, it has also proven its ability to weave a compelling story. We're cautiously optimistic.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS IIII

Developer Treyarch **Publisher** Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 12

Time was when *COD* was the trendsetter of the FPS genre. Now, it feels like a bandwagon chaser, borrowing ideas from others in its desire to once again be all things to all players. Sure, it's not the only shooter to introduce a battle-royale mode, but elsewhere it's pinching tricks from *Overwatch*, with a focus on character classes and special abilities to encourage more thoughtful team play. Still, they do shake things up a bit: the ability to manually heal with stimpacks lets you stay in the fight longer, though the fast TTK still prioritises sharp shooting over careful strategising. Meanwhile, the addition of riot shields and portable barricades brings a certain *Siege* mentality to multiplayer. Black Ops 4 – Rainbow 6? It's a chastening defeat for Activision's boys, as this former giant struggles to match the tactical invention of younger, fresher teams.



THE ELDER SCROLLS: BLADES

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** Android, iOS **Release** Autumn

Fallout Shelter showed Bethesda's talent for shrinking down its huge worlds into mobile form; it was only a matter of time before the publisher's most popular franchise got a pocket-sized edition. *TES: Blades* will, undoubtedly, sell like hot sweetrolls as a way for enthusiasts to get their fantasy action fix on the morning commute.

It looks very pretty on iPhone X, sunlight streaming through a canopy of ancient oaks, the wind dislodging the occasional flurry of leaves. Touch controls take some getting used to, mind. We're able to tap to walk or use both thumbs to walk and look around while holding the phone in landscape orientation – although it's a shame that our digits end up obscuring a good portion of the view.

There are more concessions. *Blades* is not an open-world game: the forest level we play is small, and there are no NPCs, the area instead overrun with spiders and goblins. Combat is simplified: should an enemy give us a love tap, we are automatically (and hilariously slowly) wheeled around to face it. Locked on, we swing a sword by tapping. Spells don't require aim, but there are cooldowns to manage. Mostly, however, it's a bit of a snooze, a feeling magnified by the fact that enemies queue up behind one another, politely waiting their turn for a battering. As a gateway into the series, it could prove Bethesda's *Pokémon Go* moment – but we'll stick to *Skyrim* on Switch, thanks.



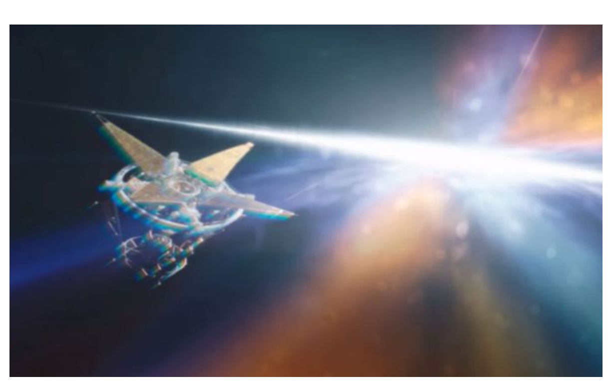
DYING LIGHT 2

Developer/publisher Techland **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

There were few more telling displays of intent at this E3 than the man Techland put on Microsoft's stage to announce *Dying Light 2*. One of the 2015 original's biggest flaws was its story – so who better to act as spokesperson for the sequel than Chris Avellone, one of the most highly regarded writers in the business?

Avellone may be the star signing, but Techland has also brought in several alumni of CD Projekt Red, some of whom worked on *The Witcher III*'s award-winning Bloody Baron quest. As that, and Avellone's hiring, implies, *Dying Light 2*'s is a branching narrative, with a world that offers you choices, then insists you live with the consequences. Our demo takes place around a water tower; once we've scaled it, we're given a choice of how the supply should be dispensed. One faction will charge residents a fee. Another will give it away gratis, but rule the area with something approaching martial law. There are multiple factions, and how you play them off against each other will have an effect on the lay, and laws, of the land.

It's smart stuff, and there's similar intelligence on show in the Dark Zone system. *Dying Light* was, in effect, two games in one, the threat and horror factor ramping up dramatically as soon as the sun set. Techland acknowledges that for some, the game was just too scary at night, and too hard. Dark Zones are always there, day or night, and must be opted into, rather than being forced upon you.



STARFIELD

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Bethesda's announcement of this, the first new IP from Bethesda Game Studios in 25 years, and the project to follow it, *The Elder Scrolls VI*, was a calculated move. After *TESO* and *Fallout 76*, Bethesda realised it might have an image problem. By announcing two singleplayer RPGs, it wanted to reassure players that it wasn't sacrificing solo play at the altar of the game as service.

Little is known about *Starfield*, a game Bethesda first trademarked in 2013. The rumour mill has been wrong about it before – sources claimed it was going to be announced at E3 2017, and released before the year was out. But there's a frequent whisper that *Starfield* is set in the same universe as *Fallout*, and tells of the first wave of space travellers hunting for somewhere a little less irradiated for humanity to resettle.

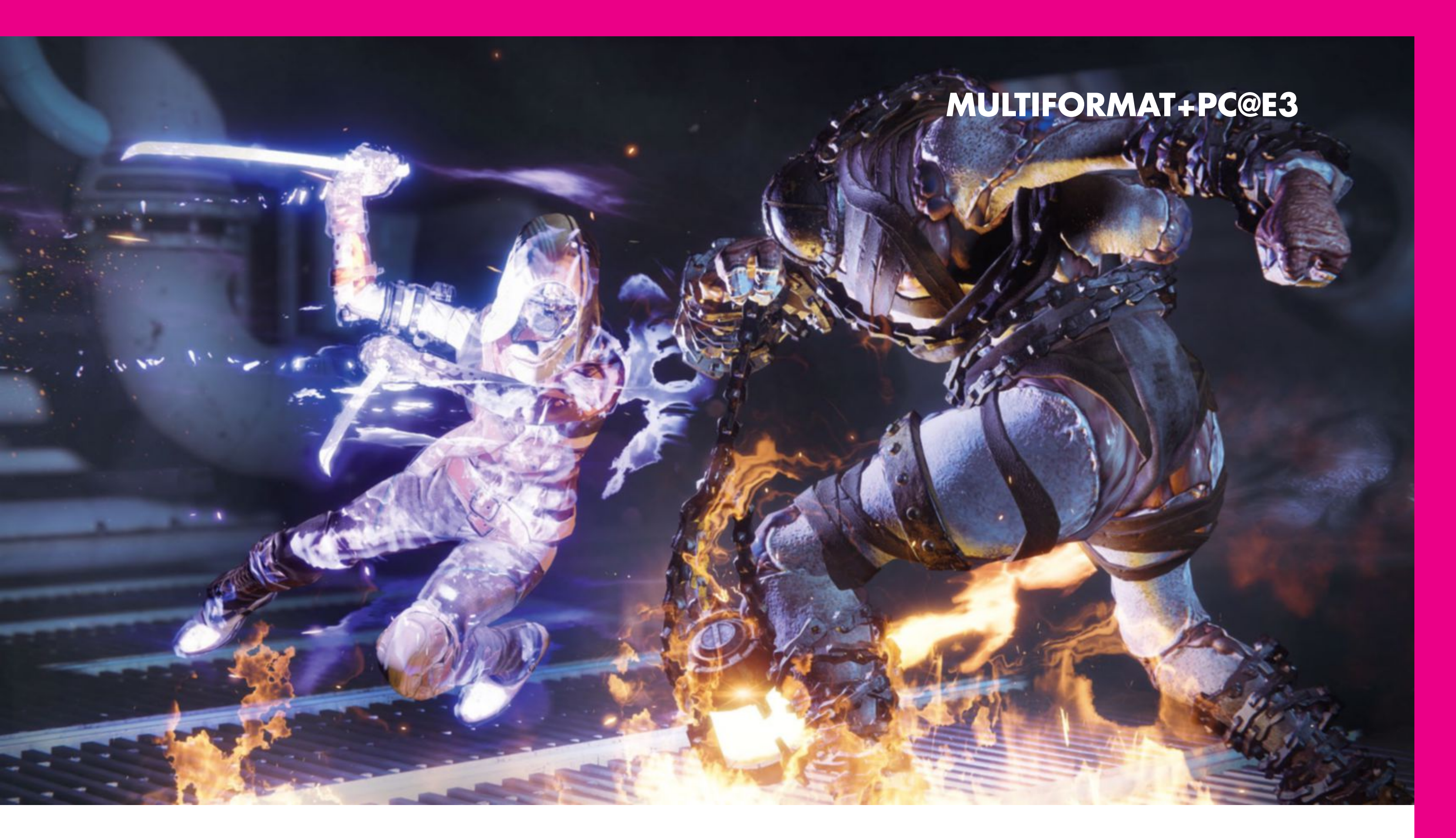


NIOH 2

Developer Team Ninja **Publisher** Koei Tecmo
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

Nioh was Team Ninja's best game in a generation, but the studio wasn't entirely happy with it. At E3 the developers admitted that several features which had to be abandoned during its development will be included in the sequel. Cards are being kept typically close to chests at the moment, but director Fumihiko Yasuda confirms that the protagonist will be fully customisable this time around.

The big gameplay change is hinted at in the teaser trailer, where a fallen warrior suddenly transforms into a demon. That will add an entirely different dimension to the pacey, technical stance-based samurai combat; yokai in the first game were slow, but hit hard. Making that as appealing as the delightful existing battle system will be challenging, and Team Ninja wants your help. As with the first game, a demo will be released so the studio can gather player feedback.



DESTINY 2: FORSAKEN

Developer Bungie, High Moon Studios **Publisher** Activision **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 4

So long then, Cayde-6. Nathan Fillion's wisecracking gunslinger has been, in *Destiny*, that rarest of beasts: a character with actual, well, character. Yet he is being killed off in *Forsaken*, the expansion that kicks off *Destiny 2*'s second year. Upset fans hastily assembled a shrine to Cayde outside the LA Convention Center. Whether the game itself will really miss a character whose one note was played out long ago remains to be seen, but it does at least show us a Bungie that is prepared to make fundamental changes to its game.

And it's entirely in keeping with a game which so regularly asks us to leave something behind; each new expansion or instalment brings new gear that renders the existing stuff obsolete. Until now, anyway. Weapons and armour from *Destiny 2*'s first year will carry over into *Forsaken*, and can be infused up to the new Power cap (a lofty 600). It's a curious decision that suggests a certain lack of confidence at a studio whose courage in its convictions has never been in doubt. Bungie's motto insists it will always seek to surprise and delight its players, though these days it often seems it is trying to merely placate them, or at least not piss them off any further.

There are plenty of advantages to this sort of Bungie. A revised weapon-slot system does away with the widely derided 'two primaries and a heavy' set-up, the quality and better balance of which Bungie was quite insistent about. In its place is the most freeform loadout system *Destiny* has ever seen, allowing for everything from the classic *Destiny 1* style to a three-shotgun set-up.

Weapons and armour from Destiny 2's first year will carry over into *Forsaken*

E3 brings us a first look at Gambit, a hybrid PvPvE mode that tasks teams with killing enemies, collecting the motes they drop and exchanging them for powerful foes that spawn in the opposing team's instance. From time to time a portal opens, letting one team member invade the opposition for 30 seconds. Eventually, a gigantic known as a Primevil will spawn, and the first team to kill theirs wins. A catch: the boss is healed by each player death, so a successful invasion can turn the match.

A quick couple of rounds only tells us so much, but certainly leaves us hungry for more – and already contemplating answers to the new strategic questions it poses. Do you use your rockets on the midboss, or keep hold of them to quickly dispatch an invader? Should you use your super to burn the Primevil, or the enemy team during an invasion? *Destiny 2* has been crying out for something truly new, and Gambit is certainly that. Whether *Forsaken* will be enough to sate the demands of an unruly community remains to be seen, of course, but early signs are positive – unless you're Nathan Fillion, anyway.



BELOW

Developer/publisher Capybara Games
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

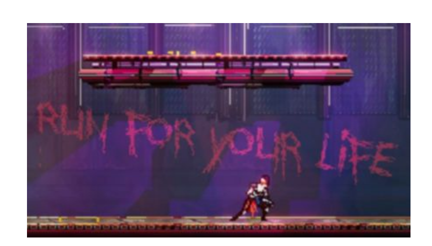
Capy's squint-inducing Roguelike returned to E3 for the fifth time, with the promise that no, honestly, it really is coming out this year. *Below* remains enigmatic and darkly fascinating, but it feels like other games have rather stolen its thunder in the meantime. Beyond those striking tilt-shift looks, does it have anything new in its locker? The studio's past form suggests so; we remain optimistic.



BLACK DESERT

Developer Pearl Abyss **Publisher** Kakao Games
Format PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

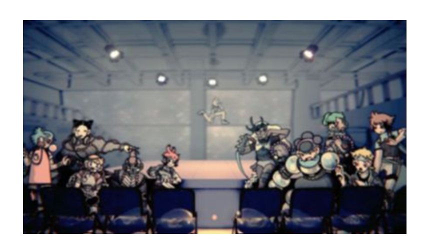
This MMO from Korean developer Pearl Abyss has been floating around on PC since 2015, and is already popular in the west. With a realtime, manual-aim targeting system governing its complex combat system, it's a more comfortable fit for consoles than most PC MMOs. Trading, housing, farming and mount-breeding are on offer in a vast open world with a dynamic weather system.



BLACK FUTURE '88

Developer Superscarysnakes **Publisher** Good Shepherd
Format PC **Release** 2018

You have just 18 minutes to fight your way to the top of a sentient tower in this shooter-platformer. Six procedurally generated zones will merrily brutalise you, any coins you smack out of enemies sucked back into a war chest to improve goons and traps. Even collectable perks come with downsides: curses that benefit your foes, or hobble your abilities. At least we have guns and determination.



BRAVERY NETWORK ONLINE

Developer Gloam Collective
Publisher Untitled Publisher **Format** PC **Release** 2018

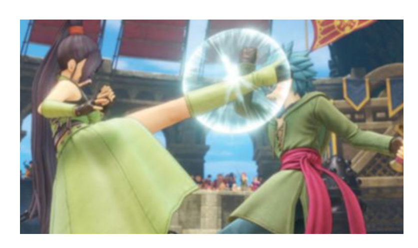
One of three E3 announcements from mysterious, minimalist new publishing outfit Untitled Publisher, *Bravery Network Online* is an eye-catching game of strategic turn-based battles in a post-apocalyptic world. It's made by Gloam Collective, a coming together of four talented young Toronto developers. It's certainly one to keep an eye on – and the same could be said for its publisher.



DON'T STARVE: HAMLET

Developer Klei Entertainment **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC **Release** December

Pushed back until year's end to meet Klei's rigorously high standards, the latest expansion for the studio's popular survival game sees protagonist Wilson stumble upon a village of well-to-do Pigmen within a dense tropical jungle. Here, he'll suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, facing vicious beasts, bugs and man-eating plants as he attempts to retrieve some piggy treasure.



DRAGON QUEST XI: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4 **Release** September 4

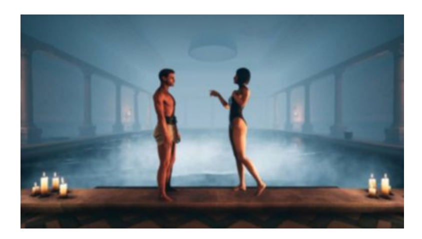
Given Square Enix's hope that *Dragon Quest XI* will finally break the west for the series (see **E**318), we'd hoped for more of a splash from Yuji Horii's enormous JRPG at E3. Still, a new demo shows an area later in the game, and a chance to test ourselves against a scorpion-like miniboss. With release close, expect the Square Enix marketing machine to kick into a higher gear any day now.



FIFA 19

Developer/publisher EA (Vancouver, Romania)
Format PC, PS3, PS4, Switch, 360, Xbox One **Release** Sept 28

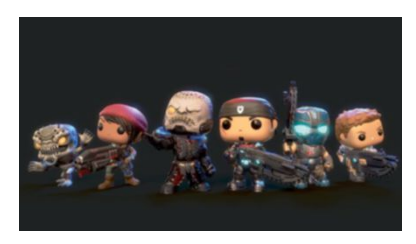
EAs' footy juggernaut rolls on, having picked up the Champions and Europa Leagues from *PES* to leave Konami's game with even less to brag about in the licensing stakes. On the pitch it's overhauling its shooting system: now it lets you control the precise moment you strike the ball. In other words, expect several dreadful mishits before you nail that swerving, dipping volley into the top corner.



THE FORGOTTEN CITY

Developer/publisher Modern Storyteller
Format PC **Release** 2019

Based on a pioneering *Skyrim* mod, this standalone adventure has stripped away the *Elder Scrolls* trappings, though the broad strokes of the narrative remain. In the eponymous city, the law determines that a single sin is enough to condemn everyone to death. Your job, inevitably, is to stop that happening: each time you fail, you'll loop back to the start, armed with fresh knowledge.



GEARS POP

Developer TBA **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format Android, iOS **Release** 2019

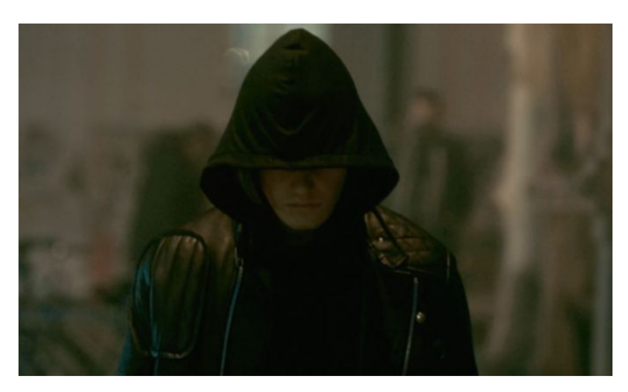
What's worse than Funko Pops? *Gears Of War* Funko Pops. There are a dozen of the things, apparently, and for some reason they're now being made into a mobile game. There's no word on whether *Gears* developer The Coalition is working on this – but the lack of confirmation of such suggests it isn't. Understandable: we wouldn't touch this with a bargepole either.



METAL WOLF CHAOS XD

Developer FromSoftware, General Arcade **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

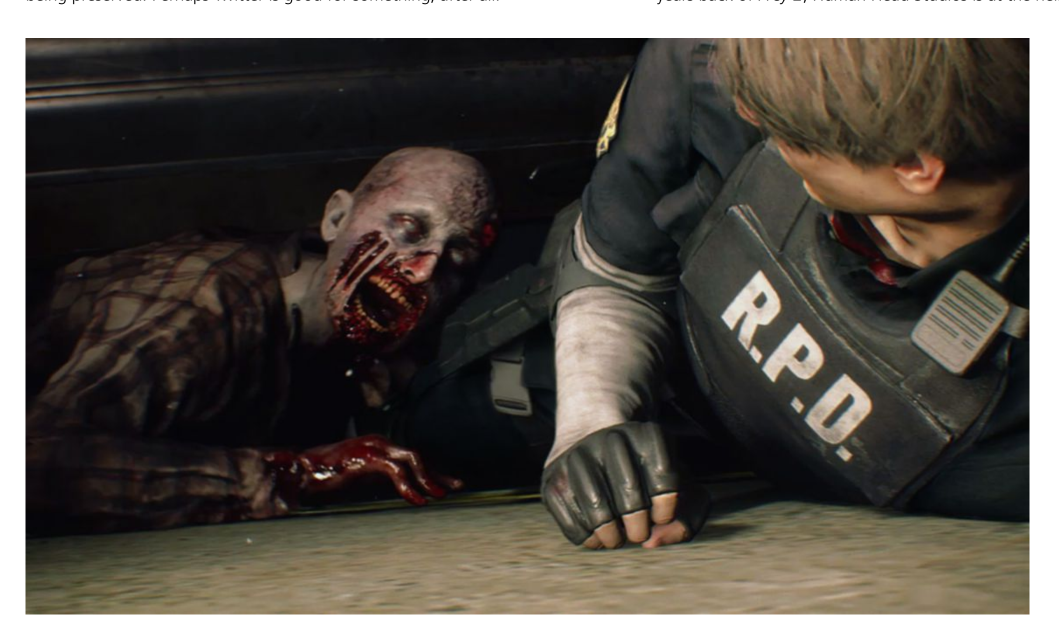
Before FromSoft made gleefully obtuse action-RPGs, the Japanese developer birthed *Metal Wolf Chaos*, an Xbox-exclusive thirdperson mecha shooter starring the 47th president of the United States. Despite never coming to the west, *Metal Wolf* garnered a cult following overseas: now, in a characteristic move that's part mischief, part business savvy, Devolver is preparing to release a fully localised remaster after a half-joking tweet became reality. The goofy original English dialogue remains, as we discover to our delight during a demo in which we strafe about the White House lawn while secretary Jody provides hilariously dry commentary. While the grubby-looking upscaled assets don't exactly line up with our idea of 'remaster' yet, we're just glad that a part of FromSoft's history is being preserved. Perhaps Twitter is good for something, after all.



THE QUIET MAN

Developer Human Head Studios **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4 **Release** TBA

Apparently not discouraged by the collective shrug that greeted Remedy's *Quantum Break*, Square's mysterious new project presents a similar blend of live-action cutscenes and thirdperson action. Rather than separating the two, it appears they'll blend into one another: what begins as a confrontation in a New York alley segues rather neatly into an interactive brawl, with the game's sullen, floppy-haired hero delivering a brutal slo-mo-enhanced beatdown to a pair of goons. Without Microsoft's cash to attract a star cast, this appears to be very much in B-movie territory – indeed, it's designed to be completed in a single sitting – though its lead's apparent deafness adds mechanical intrigue, as does the identity of its developer: having somehow survived the cancellation a few years back of *Prey 2*, Human Head Studios is at the helm of this one.



RESIDENT EVIL 2

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** January 19

Hats off, Capcom. Fans had been clamouring for a remake of *Resident Evil 2* for years; the publisher drew the ire of its community by issuing a cease and desist against the group of fans making a remaster of their own. E3 finally brought our first sight of a game announced back in 2015, and it contains a terrifying surprise – one designed to subtly troll the players who had so loudly called for the game to be remade.

This is no mere visual update. Zombie placements have been subtly remixed, too. We're told of one cocky journalist who inched carefully down a corridor in the demo build which, in the original, had a Licker on the ceiling. They soon realised it wasn't there any more, and their world fell apart. Twenty-year-old, dearly cherished memories suddenly counted for nothing.

The game has been reborn in an over-the-shoulder perspective powered by the RE Engine, the same tech that powers *Resident Evil 7*. It's sumptuous stuff, especially when zombies are on screen; get bitten and the camera zooms tight in on the action, torrents of blood gushing from the fresh wound. Despite its age, this was one of the most pleasant surprises of the show – and at one of the best booths, too, entered via a series of blood-spattered corridors with blind corners, unsettling noises and, inevitably, the undead. We promise we didn't sob.



ANTHEM

Developer BioWare **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** February 22

Well, if you're going to put a jetpack in your videogame, you might as well do it properly. *Mass Effect: Andromeda*'s effort was little more than a flashy extra. But in *Anthem*, the jetpack has evolved far beyond anything BioWare has done. "Once it becomes a mobility device, it changes everything," producer **Mike Gamble** says. "We had to create the world and the jetpack kind of at the same time, because the jetpack had to play within the world."

The lush crevasse we're peering into demonstrates this admirably. A click of the left stick launches our javelin exosuit, the Ranger, into the air. Clicking in the right stick lets us hover; another click and we drop back onto the starting platform. It's cumbersome at first, but once we're comfortable it's straight off the deep end with the rest of our crew. Traversal is easily the standout element of our demo, as we swoop in to engage the clusters of Scars stomping through the undergrowth – then



NPCs in the hub will send you off on special story-focused missions, while Strongholds act like *Destiny* Strikes, offering team-focused challenges of increasing difficulty to grind for loot

break out into a jet-fuelled sprint to the next ledge and fling ourselves over it, the four of us performing an almost synchronised rocket dive into a deep underwater tunnel.

It's the exhilarating stuff of superhero fantasy, and as we happen upon a larger group of enemies we realise it has a tactical benefit: from up on high the first moments of a fight in *Anthem* play out almost like a realtime strategy game. It's a shame we have to ground ourselves so frequently due to our jetpack overheating. Gamble tells us that Bioware is keen to discourage too much in-air scrapping, preferring to bring players down to (not) Earth for short, close-up encounters – and we can't deny there's a pleasing and unique rhythm to the fly-hover-land loop.

The actual combat is less amenable. Bioware's strength has never lain in its shooting, and the limp machine gun our Ranger is toting does little to raise the pulse. We're reliant on a frost grenade, a mortar and a missile-spewing ultimate to offer some variety. It's particularly needed during our demo's final battle against a gaggle of generic spider enemies in a dark, cramped cave that hides *Anthem*'s best light under a bushel as we struggle to fly free. The run-of-the-mill sci-fi arachnids are a disappointment, but understandable: Bioware is creating a new IP, and a few familiar elements can't hurt to introduce players to a singular new traversal system. Since it's able to elevate fairly average shooting to the heights of something we could see ourselves rounding up the *Destiny* gang for, it's safe to say that it's got one hell of a jetpack.



RAGE 2

Developer Avalanche Studios, Id Software **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Spring

Good heavens, that shotgun. The impact of it leaves us giddy. The poor mohawked chap we've just unloaded it on probably isn't so enamoured, flying backwards into the wall of the facility and splattering into mulch. But we've not been this hot and bothered about anything in a long old time. We're starting to understand what being American feels like.

Rage 2 has Id Software's prints all over it, from the shoulder-dislocating kick of its guns to the industrial pulse of the soundtrack propelling us through its corridors. Things err just on the right side of stupid: the first game's trademark Wingstick returns, which we fling out indiscriminately and which embeds itself in targeted enemy faces while we work away at the rest of the room.

There are plenty of options to help create the space needed. A dash lets us smartly sidestep into useful new angles. Our Nanotrite abilities include Slam, a ground pound that sends enemies skyward, and Shatter, which pushes bodies back so violently that they often burst before we can even fire a follow-up volley. Chaining it all together into one uninterrupted sequence is the way to go about things in an Id shooter. And it's remarkably simple to do so in *Rage 2*, with a cacophony of yells from brightly coloured goons constantly telling us where to aim.

But as we crash-land the building into desert sand and emerge blinking into the light to start our next spree, it soon becomes clear that Id is all we'll be seeing today. The heady combination of the world's foremost FPS experts and the open-world knowhow of Avalanche is the real selling point – but our fight outside plays much like the one inside, devoid of the weapon-mounted vehicles shown off in the trailers. It is, at least, nice to get a glimpse of greenery in between all the Day-Glo heads we're popping. *Mad Max* – and even more thankfully, *Rage* – this is not, with beige and brown giving way to a post-post-apocalyptic world in the process of righting itself. Before we activate our Overdrive meter, that is, and start blowing chunks out of the scenery with oversized bullets.

Beige and brown give way to a post-post-apocalyptic world in the process of righting itself

There will no doubt be more to see as soon as Bethesda figures out how best to pitch the risen phoenix that is *Rage 2*: on the *Doom*-esque qualities of its close-quarters combat, or on the promise of the open-world, systems-driven chaos at which Avalanche has proven itself so adept. We hope the balance will be fine enough that one voice won't drown out the other – but on the strength of that shotgun's argument, *Rage 2*'s Swedish contingent will need to make a damn good case for itself.



SKULL & BONES

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Singapore)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

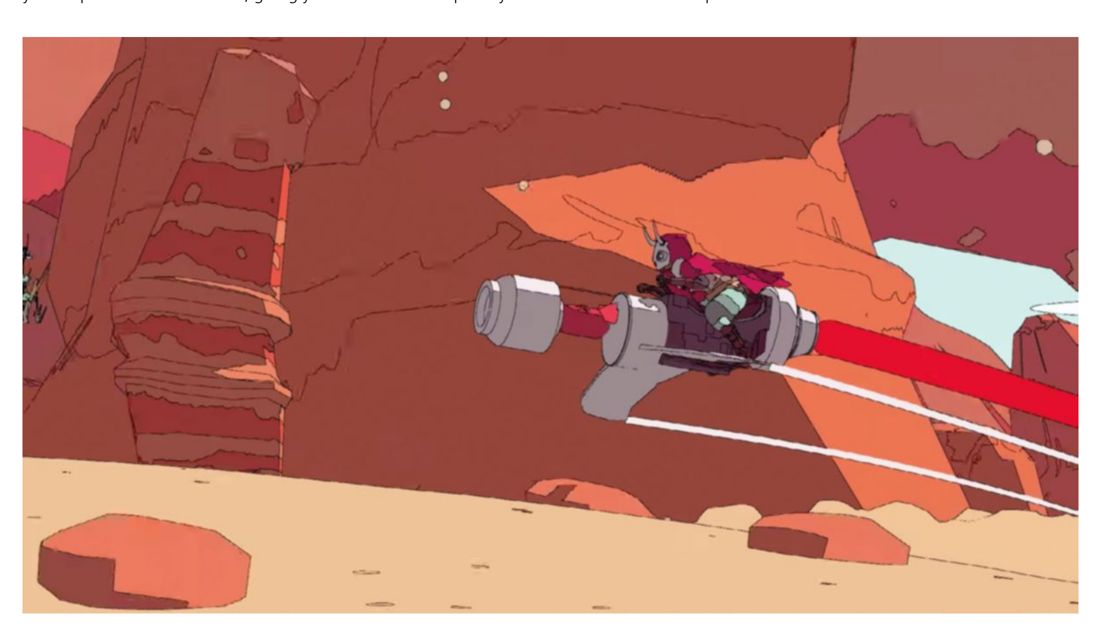
After the knockabout comedy of *Sea of Thieves*, Ubisoft's vision of life on the high seas treats piracy as serious business – up to a point. This is a game where one type of ship merely needs to drop anchor to temporarily launch rapid volleys of cannon fire without needing to reload. Ubisoft Singapore has sacrificed authenticity for entertainment, and its game is all the better for it. The pace of the action is implausibly fast, but sharp presentation gives it a certain heft. The camera snaps to the crew during broadsides and zips down to the bow as you ram opponents, while the yells of your shipmates, the boom of the cannons and cracking of wooden beams make for an exhilarating cacophony. Such a racket naturally risks attracting attention from rival pirates; luckily, you can disguise your ship as a merchant vessel, giving you the chance to slip away unnoticed.



ARCA'S PATH VR

Developer Dream Reality Interactive **Publisher** Rebellion Developments
Format PSVR, Rift, Vive **Release** 2018

An oasis of calm at the end of a hectic day at E3, *Arca's Path VR* has us guide a ball through a series of gentle pastel marble runs using only our gaze. Tilting our head with slight motions rolls the ball around corners and onto moving platforms in dreamlike levels: it's a totem representing Arca, a girl trapped in a virtual world by an evil android witch. The game is the work of Dream Reality Interactive, a UK start-up helmed by former Sony London Studio director Dave Ranyard, who wanted the freedom to continue creating alternative immersive projects. But the two brief opening levels we play of *Arca's Path VR* walk a fine line between relaxing and yawn-inducing. The very last section, however, opens up the tight constraints of the run into a swift flume ride that leaves us giddy – and hopeful that this'll be more *Rez Infinite* than retirement home.



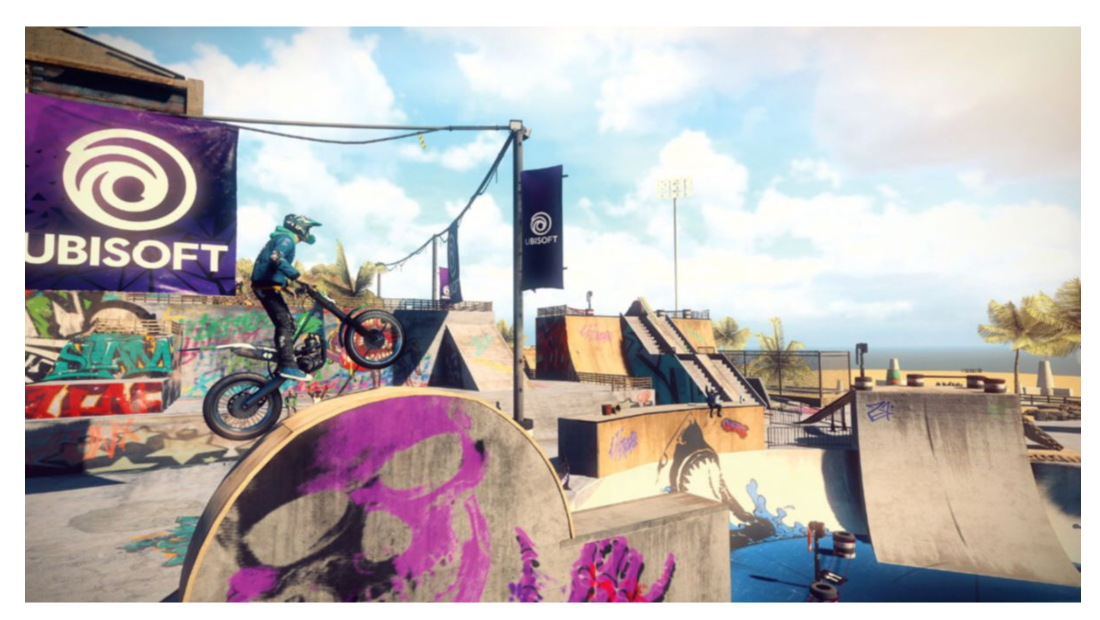
SABLE

Developer Shedworks **Publisher** Raw Fury **Format** PC **Release** 2019

Even *Sable*'s creators are a little unsure of it. Its vast desert is so sparsely landmarked that we're instructed to go in a particular direction, lest we end up somewhere so unknown that the developers must reset the demo to reorient us. Rather than put off, we're captivated by this sense of danger and romance – and, inevitably, end up having to hand the controller over before starting again.

The few customisable hoverbikes we ride are similar only in their staunch refusal to obey us, wobbling and sliding around the sand while often kicking up enough 2D dust to completely occlude our view. Once we're more accustomed, however, we're starring in our very own Moebius strip or Ghibli movie, speeding through a gigantic ribcage, Red Riding Hood cape flapping in the wind. At the ruins, we dismount and explore; a smart camera cut frames our meanderings beautifully and helps direct us onward.

Deeper in the ruins, we're thankful for a series of basic switch-based puzzles that give us leeway to wrestle the camera into submission. The architecture, however, is hauntingly lovely. A dark, spiralling vertical chamber tests our ability to glide, in a kind of shimmering lava bubble, between crumbling passageways and over to the next switch. While it's still early days for *Sable*, the raw spirit it possesses is intoxicating – and despite its developers' protestations, we find ourselves eager to get lost in it for real.

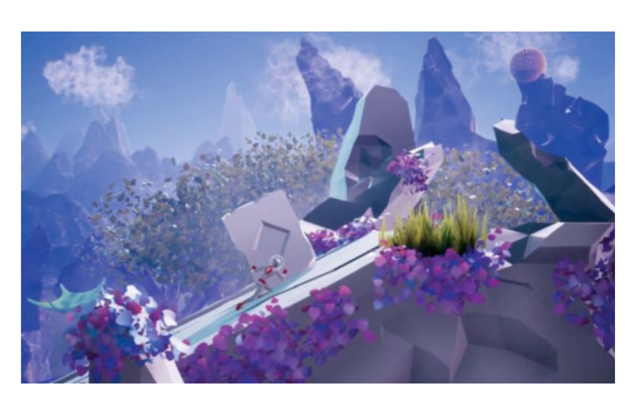


TRIALS RISING

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (RedLynx, Kiev) **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** February 2019

The show's best entrance belonged to RedLynx's frankly bonkers creative director **Antti Ilvessuo**. "*Trials* is all about crashing with style and getting up again," he said, immediately after doing just that: having entered the auditorium on a dirt bike, he milked the applause of the crowd, high-fiving everyone in the front row, before hurling himself into a lectern and destroying it. And yet all of this nonsense was in aid of a new *Trials* game that has dialled back the gimmicks. Following faulty spin-off *Trials Of The Blood Dragon*, the series is returning to its roots for its first mainline entry in five years.

Which isn't to say you won't get into some spectacular scrapes. But rather than being burdened with a silly plotline, *Rising*'s campaign takes the form of a straightforward globe-hopping journey set in and around real-world locations. You'll tackle increasingly dangerous obstacle courses from Seoul to Pripyat, the Eiffel Tower to Yellowstone National Park. If online opponents aren't quite cutting it, there's a four-player local multiplayer option, and even a new co-op mode called Tandem, where you and a partner must work together to control your bike. RedLynx has been working with community members to build a better tutorial, offering a gentler introduction to a series whose difficulty curve has become as steep as some of its near-vertical ramps. A closed beta due later this year should give us a clearer picture of whether *Trials* really is back on track.



PLANET ALPHA

Developer Adrian Lazar **Publisher** Team 17
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2018

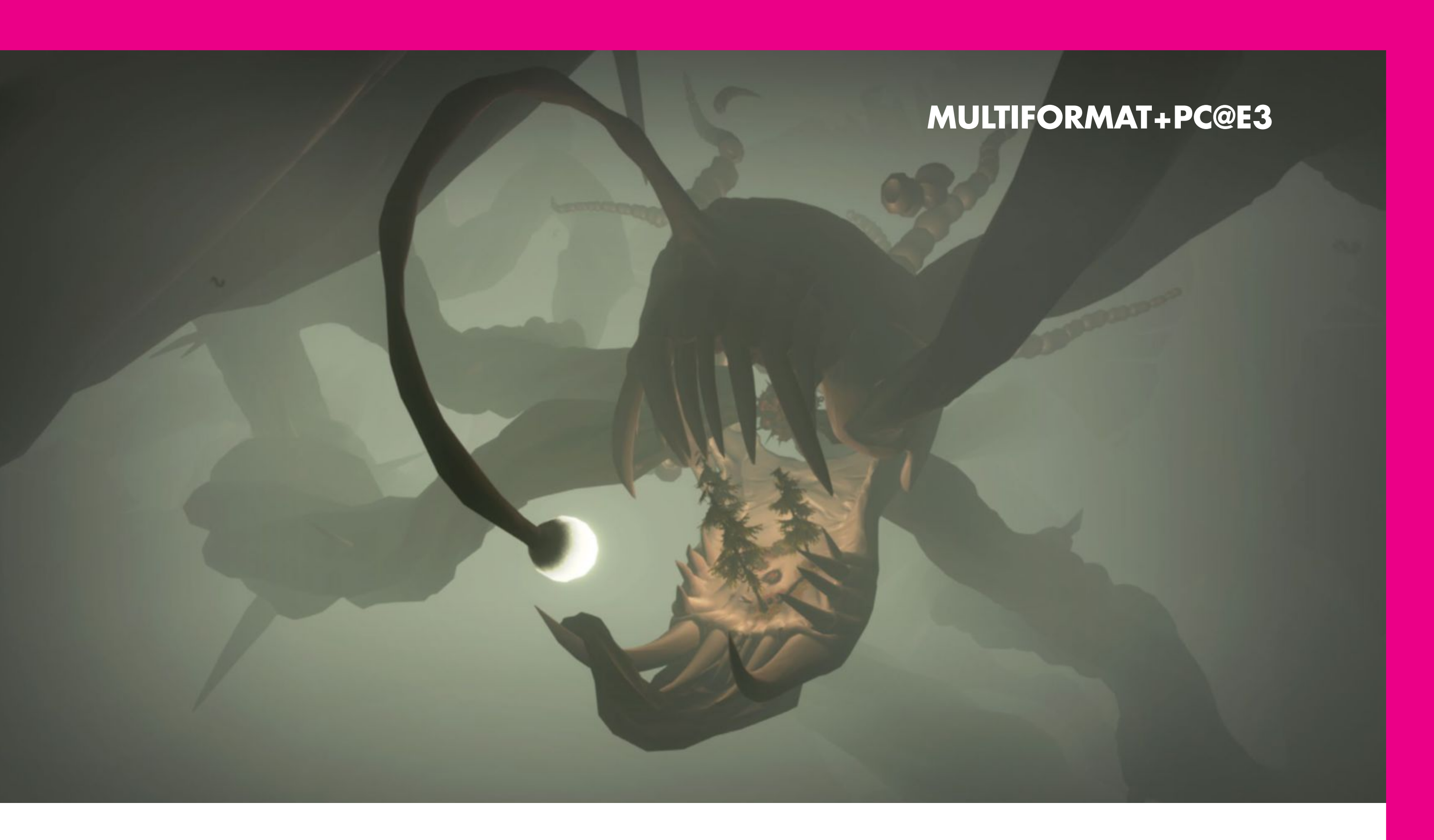
Side-scrolling space platformer *Planet Alpha* is undeniably beautiful: the air is teeming with alien creatures, and bioluminescent flora waves gently in an unseen current. But the process of moving through this mesmeric environment can be infuriating. Jumping is unwieldy, but worse still is the stealth: the capabilities of the enemies we're trying to sneak past are woefully unclear, some oblivious and others instantly sniffing us out in the tall grass like psychic attack dogs. But the most heartbreaking part of our demo is when we're stymied by the gorgeous art itself, failing to divine that a branch disguised by pretty leaves – some way back from the suggestive chasm ahead – is the surface we're actually supposed to be climbing. Perhaps it's too much to ask of a solo dev's side project, but we'd like some significant changes to be made before release.



GEARS TACTICS

Developer The Coalition **Publisher** Microsoft
Format PC **Release** TBA

Well, a turn-based strategy prequel makes more sense than a Funko Pop spin-off, that's for sure. In fact, *Gears*' chunky characters and cover-heavy encounters feel like such a natural fit for the strategy genre it's a wonder this hasn't happened before. At least until you remember Microsoft has been busy doing something similar, albeit in realtime, for *Halo*. Twice. Indeed, perhaps the underwhelming reception afforded to *Halo Wars 2* is the reason this is – for now, at least – a PC exclusive. Set 12 years before events of the first game, it's *Gears XCOM* in all but name, as four-man squads tackle a huge alien threat. Derivative as it may be, the *Gears* dressing does give it something extra. Those splattery slo-mo headshots do look awfully satisfying; likewise, tossing a Bolo grenade into a cluster of Locust, or chewing them up using a turret on overwatch.



OUTER WILDS

Developer Mobius Digital **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

Like a moth to a flame, we are drawn back to *Outer Wilds* at its E3 demo station this year. An adventure set in a solar system that is stuck in a time loop and destroys itself every 20 realtime minutes, it's a strangely meditative experience. Our time may be limited, but our chances aren't: upon hitting our limit a supernova whites out the screen, and we begin another 20-minute jaunt.

We're in no rush. We spend ages testing our lovely, spongy jump – holding the button down longer before releasing means we're sprung a little higher – and chit-chatting with the space-suited locals. Campfire smoke curls up through the pine trees as we potter around idly, hoping to bump into our starship. There's now a stylised, screen-printed aspect to *Outer Wilds*' muted, autumnal palette: all of the art has been redone, art director Wesley Martin proudly informs us. If *Firewatch* had been set in space, it might have looked something like this.

There's now a stylised, screen-printed aspect to Outer Wilds' muted, autumnal palette

There are so many points of interest on our meandering search for transport off the planet that we're constantly distracted. A little spacesuited NPC challenging us to pilot a remote-control toy onto small platforms is a useful, as well as charming, episode; a way of introducing new players to the floaty controls of the real deal. The observatory in which we find the launch codes is delightful: one displayed artifact lets us walk up and around the walls, while a bizarre hunk of alien rock appears on a different platform every time we look away and back again. These interludes mean that, strangely, we're already feeling genuine pangs of nostalgia when we finally do enter the homely cockpit of our ship and set off into the atmosphere, the planet shrinking behind us.

This pocket of familiarity and stability within *Outer Wilds* does wonders for its sense of exploring the unknown. We're gently curious, instead of fearful, when we head to a water planet with fierce whirlpools growing straight out of the ocean's surface. Another spacesuited being greets us from a hammock, and furnishes us with some lore. It's duly filed away in a new 'Rumours' menu, which, creative director Alex Beachum tells us, will remain even when our 20 minutes are up, aiding investigations in new time loops and proffering some urgency and direction.

Indeed, we've perhaps become too laissez-faire, wandering into a cavern filled with a ghostly matter that accelerates our death – and we're rewound back to our home planet, memories intact. But as another 20-minute loop begins, our demo time comes to a close – and we reluctantly leave the peaceful *Outer Wilds* for the mania of the show floor, already longing to return.



When tensions reach highs in certain areas, warring factions will engage in Conquest battles – huge, 300-soldier clashes. You're able to win the day by successfully killing certain targets

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montréal) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 5

Giving *Assassin's Creed* a year off between 2015's *Syndicate* and last year's *Origins* certainly yielded plenty of change, if not exactly dividends. The series began in 2007 as an overambitious open-world action adventure, and re-emerged in 2017 as a more assured, yet still somehow confused open-world action RPG. *Odyssey* seeks to build on the latter foundation, though as will probably always be the case, Ubisoft hasn't focused on the things you'd most like to have seen fixed.

Combat, for instance, is as clunky as it was in *Origins*, still lacking the precision and grace of the FromSoftware systems to which it owes such a debt. While the fundamentals are the same, there's a new twist in how the adrenaline meter is used. In *Origins*, a full bar would trigger a powered-up state; here it can also be used in chunks to perform skills, chosen from a sprawling menu tree – breaking a shield, or unleashing a powerful Spartan Kick. These moves are awkwardly accessed from a radial menu brought up by holding the left bumper – the same button



you must tap in good time to parry incoming attacks. Combat may be more broad, but we'd trade elegance for variety every time.

Still, if it's variety you want, there's plenty of it elsewhere. As the additions to combat suggest, this is more of an RPG than ever; once you've made your choice of the two protagonists, Kassandra and Alexios, you'll find a game of dialogue options, branching questlines and multiple endings. Whoever you choose will play through the same storyline: the performances may be slightly different, but everything else is the same. That, cheeringly, extends to the romance options, resulting in us ending our demo with Kassandra making eyes at the female leader of the local resistance.

And it's here that we find the changes that matter most. It is not so long ago, after all, that Ubisoft was complaining that female playable characters were an animation job too far. The transformation of *Assassin's Creed* from action adventure to RPG may not have run entirely smooth, but at its heart is an understanding that it is what the player wants that matters most. That taste is a spectrum – one that games must work harder to cater for. In that context, perhaps a clunky combat system is a little easier to accept.

Elsewhere, *Odyssey* is just content to be an *Assassin's Creed* game. There's the same simple pleasure to be had from just poking around, climbing things for no greater reason than the fact they are there to be climbed, and jumping off tall stuff is fun. The return of *Black Flag*'s seafaring is welcome, and a particularly sumptuous sight in an already handsome game. *Assassin's Creed* will always be flawed, but we find ourselves blocking out a few dozen hours in early October once again.



JUST CAUSE 4

Developer Avalanche Studios **Publisher** Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** December 4

This was a busy E3 for Swedish studio Avalanche, but of the three games the studio unveiled at the show, *Just Cause 4* is the purest expression of the studio's skillset. Not to take anything away from *Rage 2* or the self-published *Generation Zero*, but Avalanche has made its name on wanton, systems-driven destruction – and *Just Cause 4* takes that ethos to ludicrous extremes.

The studio has taken *Just Cause 3*'s reception to heart. Rico Rodriguez's 2015 outing was a touch repetitive, both in environment – the Mediterranean island of Medici had little to offer in terms of variety – and its content, which pretty much had you doing the same things in hour 30 you were doing in hour one, albeit with better toys.

Avalanche has made its name on wanton destruction – and Just Cause 4 takes that ethos to ludicrous extremes

Rodriguez is back, and so is the beating, exploding, physics-heavy heart of the game. But the new setting, the fictional South American nation of Solis, is split into four discrete biomes. And for the possibility space, Rodriguez's grappling hook is a central tool in his arsenal; it can deploy so many gadgets and doodads from range that Avalanche has had to include a switchable loadout system.

New toys include the Air Lifter, clearly modelled on *Metal Gear Solid V*'s Fulton device, though the difference here is that Rodriguez is in full control of it. Our demo handler attaches a series of explosive devices to a shipping container, lifts it high in the air, then drops it on a bridge. Tethering one side of it to solid ground and using explosives creates a deadly merry-go-round, twirling through the air smashing everything it touches. No doubt this player, behind closed doors on the final day of E3, has done this dozens of times by now, but in a game where physics are everything, things don't always go to plan. Rodriguez meets the business end of a runaway shipping container, an elegantly improvised combination of grapple hook, wingsuit and parachute soon restoring him to solid ground.

The new Frontline system reflects your progress in reclaiming the world from the nefarious Black Hand, the army Rodriguez raises steadily pushing enemy forces back as you progress. The entire gameworld will be subject to weather conditions (the earlier hiccup was in part caused by a strong wind) and our demo concludes with Rodriguez chasing down a tornado – fully simulated, naturally – and taking out Black Hand's wind cannons so the storm can decimate a vital enemy airport. Things fall a little flat here, as our hero flits between objective markers shooting static machines while fending off enemies. But there's more than enough promise to suggest that as busy as Avalanche has recently been, its signature series hasn't suffered a bit.



BATTLEFIELD V

Developer DICE **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 19

We'd anticipated a slew of battle royale games or modes this E3, certain that publishers would be climbing over one another to leap aboard the bandwagon. As such, it was no surprise when *Battlefield* stepped into the fray alongside *COD*. But we didn't expect it to borrow another trick from *Fortnite*. If you're unhappy with your current cover situation, you can erect fortifications in a matter of moments – piling up sandbags, for example, to fire from a position of relative safety.

With EA making a point of dropping loot boxes and premium passes, it's looking for other ways to keep players coming back. Tides of War is the answer: this transforms *Battlefield* into something like a service game, with an ongoing narrative that will be regularly updated in the months after launch. Each new chapter will contain multiple timed events, including an expansion of *Battlefield 1*'s Operations mode. The only extras you'll have to pay for, we're assured, will be purely cosmetic; it seems the publisher has learned its lesson from *Battlefront 2*'s pay-to-win mechanics. Big changes are afoot, then, but none of these was quite as controversial as the presence of a woman soldier in the game's trailer. Happily, DICE's Oskar Gabrielson made the studio's position clear, tweeting: "Player choice and female playable characters are here to stay."



AFTERPARTY

Developer/publisher Night School Studio
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2019

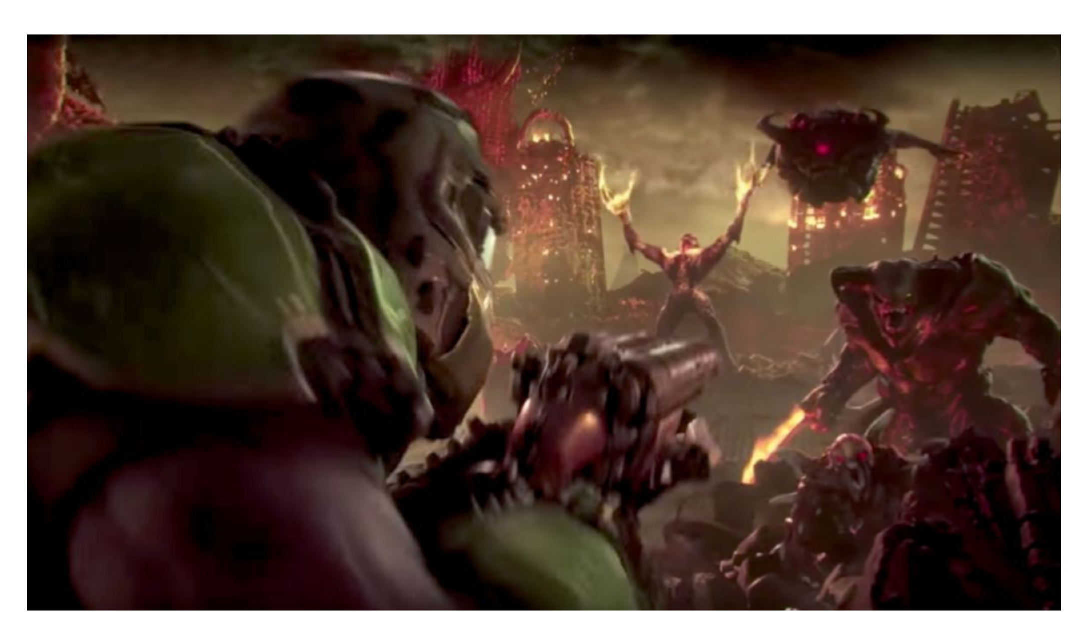
We always knew the YouTubers would end up in Hell. In what is surely the ultimate instance of 'It's just a prank, bro!', *Afterparty*'s latest demo sees Milo and Lola socialising at their high school graduation bash before the walls fall away and a gaggle of gleeful demons reveal that, surprise, the two of them are dead and doomed to an eternity of suffering. An adventure about escaping the Inferno by out-drinking Satan, it continues to look wickedly stylish and funny – the boozy underworld is far livelier than the previous game's haunted island, and a brief stroll along the neon-lit strip instantly gives a vivid impression of what purgatory's like in its off-hours. Beer pong seems popular, with Lola facing down the Pong Demon in a minigame that allows you to adjust the trajectory of each shot and talk all kinds of smack to put off your opponent.



METRO EXODUS

Developer 4A Games **Publisher** Deep Silver
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** February 22

Less an FPS, more a firstperson survival horror with guns, the *Metro* series has thus far been defined by the relentlessly tense, claustrophobic atmosphere of its mutant-infested subway tunnels. Stepping outside its discomfort zone and going overground might sound like a bad idea, but you can rest assured that the Volga region is every bit as oppressive. The place is still heavily irradiated, so you'll need to manage your gas-mask's filter while scavenging for gear and ammo. If we're a little bored of crafting, it has an obvious place in this world, and it's more than just a perfunctory this-plus-that-makes-the-other system. You can mod weapons on the fly, making your long-range rifle deadly at close quarters. Cleaning your guns, meanwhile, is crucial, since they'll steadily accumulate dirt, potentially causing them to jam.



DOOM ETERNAL

Developer Id Software **Publisher** Bethesda **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Bethesda introduced this sequel to 2016's stellar *Doom* reboot by describing it as "Hell on Earth", which is no longer quite the escapist fantasy it once was. Still, *Doom Eternal*'s promise of "double the demons" – whether that means double the types of them, or the numbers – means a welcome dose of shotgun-powered catharsis, if nothing else.

Details are – yes! – thin on the ground, but it appears the story picks up soon after the reboot left off, when the protagonist was despatched to Hell. It turns out that was a little closer to home than originally thought. The trailer offers a glimpse of the enemy types that have made the journey to Earth, and there's a return for the Pain Elemental, a sort of armed Cacodemon that appeared in the 1993 original.

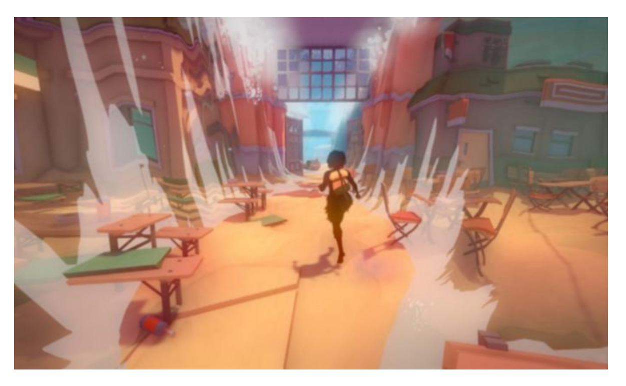
With Bethesda declining to specify a release date, *Doom Eternal* once again prompted speculation about the next generation, though with tech and tools already in place a current-gen launch seems more likely. The game's title does, however, hint at a rather longer tail than that enjoyed by its predecessor, which came and went without any singleplayer DLC, despite the fact it would surely have sold well (post-release multiplayer content was eventually made free, presumably to up the player count). That seems like a mistake that Bethesda is unlikely to make again.



KINGDOM HEARTS III

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PS4, Xbox One **Release** January 29

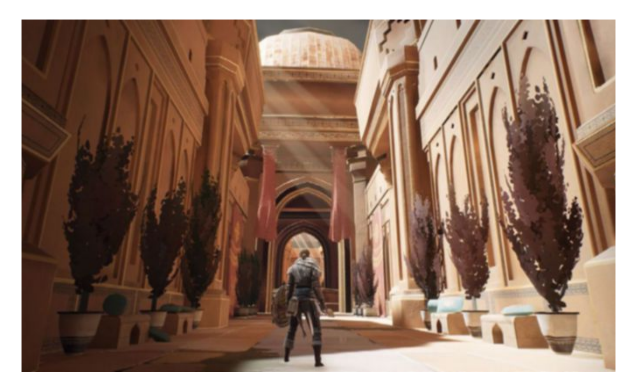
Yes, it really does exist. Seventeen years on from the original, a mere 13 since the second game and following more than a dozen offshoots, prequels and spin-offs, the end of the trilogy is finally in sight. There's much to admire here: we've seen Disney and Pixar's worlds brought to life before but never with this fidelity. Each new kingdom offers something different, too: Frozen sees you engage in ice-skating battles and snow-slide pursuits, while Pirates Of The Caribbean has underwater exploration and ship battles. The realtime combat is dynamic, the art design and production values dazzling. And yet everything stops when the overwrought story kicks in. Can such a generous sprinkling of Disney magic obscure the stench of the ludicrously convoluted plotting and wretched dialogue? Barring yet another delay, we're not far off finding out.



SEA OF SOLITUDE

Developer Jo-Mei Games **Publisher** EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Early 2019

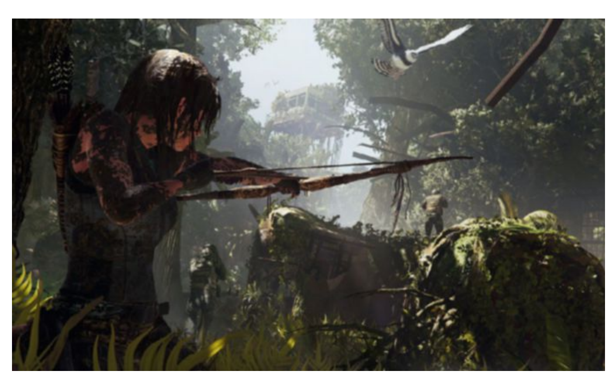
Perhaps loneliness feels like drowning to you, or living in an otherworldly realm, or turning into a monster. It is all these things in *Sea Of Solitude*: directed by Cornelia Geppert, the game tells the story of Kay, a young girl who has become so lonely as to transform into a shadowy being. On her quest to discover how to regain her usual form, she must explore a partially submerged city and meet other creatures who share her plight. We see tortured giantesses, eagles and anglerfish as Kay steers a small motorboat through waterlogged ruins, or leaps between and dives from rooftops in her pursuit of the truth. Geppert admits it's a deeply personal game, evidenced by the fact that the city is based on her hometown of Berlin. While further details are being kept under wraps for now, one thing's for sure: this is going to hurt. In a good way, we think.



ASHEN

Developer Aurora44 **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

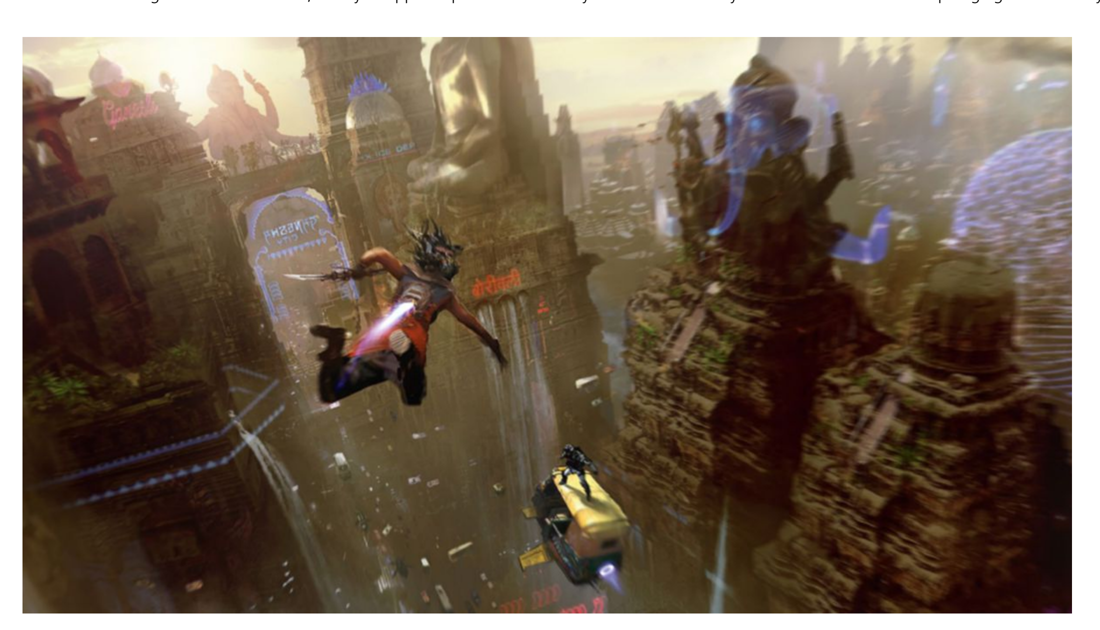
Turns out that one *is* the loneliest number that you'll ever do. It's odd that *Ashen* is presented as a singleplayer demo this year – it's been sold as a Soulslike with puzzles designed to encourage silent co-op with strangers that you meet in its world. But devoid of in-game company, hacking through its hostile lands leaves us cold. Fortunately, there are glimmers of creativity even on this solitary journey: a mask with bone antlers that lets us take extra hits, before slowly regrowing, ready to be used again; a gigantic, god-like whale-dragon floating in the sky; curious monoliths that let players teleport-jump across the map; a glimpse of a dangerous golden world guarded by a *Bloodborne*-esque boss. Still, it's rather empty without a wordless buddy to explore with, and we worry that should *Ashen* become a ghost town at launch, it may disappear up in smoke entirely.



SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Developer Eidos Montreal **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 14

Crystal Dynamics' 2013's reboot was hardly sunbeams and fluffy kittens; sequel *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* was gloomier still. Yet this is, we're told, the darkest chapter of the new trilogy. It's certainly the most brutal: it could easily be retitled *Lara Croft: Mass Murderer*, with the hapless grunts of returning baddies Trinity being variously throttled, burned and asphyxiated by hanging. As Lara races them to get her hands on a Mayan artifact, she'll have to "become one with the jungle" – sadly this doesn't mean gaining an intimate knowledge of the work of Goldie and M Beat, but rather learning animalistic techniques like camouflage. Failing that, she can scare them with 'fear arrows'. We'd prefer a bit more of that kind of silliness, really: the underwater sections which see her wrestling with Moray eels are far more fun than plunging a knife into yet another neck.



BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montpellier) **Format** TBA **Release** TBA

Still no confirmation of what we'll be playing it on, and still no release date for the prequel to Jade and Pey'j's original adventure: Ubisoft definitely jumped the gun announcing *Beyond Good & Evil 2* so early. In fairness, we can see why. The pre-alpha footage of Ganesha is radiant, a metropolis of temples and neon billboards built upon a seedy underbelly, and it's only a small slice of the seamless open-world RPG Montpellier is creating.

Well, Montpellier and a legion of fans. "We are issuing an open invitation to people all over the world," senior producer **Guillaume Brunier** said, on stage at the Ubi conference, "to contribute images, music, artworks, and to create original content that players will experience as they explore the world." A nice idea – if it's done correctly.

So we cocked an eyebrow when Ubi wheeled out celebrity heartthrob and HitRecord co-founder Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who enthused about how his company would help make every superfan's dream come true in this lovely, cuddly, creatively collaborative space, you guys. Sure enough, a quick Google revealed that while HitRecord *will* be paying artists – at least, those whose work is actually chosen – the pot totals just $50,000, less than the median annual salary of a junior designer. Perhaps all that cheap labour might help Montpellier produce something more substantial in time for next year.



TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Massive) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** March 15

This was, for once, an E3 lacking in scandal, but *The Division 2* got closer than most to provoking an outcry. Ubisoft's continued insistence that its games are not intended to be political statements was once again trotted out here. If *Far Cry 5*'s tale of a hardline religious cult in the American midwest was hard enough to swallow as apolitical, *The Division 2*'s move to Washington DC – while doubtless greenlit before the current political pre-apocalypse – feels even less like a work of message-free storytelling. CEO Yves Guillemot says he prefers his company to present players with a situation from which they can draw their own political conclusions, which is fair enough in a way. But as ever with Ubisoft's use of the Clancyverse, *The Division 2* reflects a publisher that wants to have its cake and shoot it.

It will, at least, go down a little more quickly this time. Developer Massive has acknowledged that the first game's bullet-sponge enemies sat at odds with its realistic setting – an early boss wore a hoodie, but took dozens of headshots to put down. Time-to-kill has been reduced across the board in the sequel: basic, red-bar enemies go down quickly, and tougher foes will be heavily armoured. Said armour is destructible, falling apart as you whittle down their health-bar shields.

Another lesson drawn from the first game was the importance of the endgame. A driving factor in the initially cool response to *The Division* was its lack of meaningful things to do once you hit the level cap. Massive says the endgame has been its top priority throughout development. Now, when you reach the cap, you'll unlock Specialisations, gaining a unique powerful weapon type. On show at E3 are a crossbow, 50-cal sniper rifle and grenade launcher, though many more await in the final game. If it's activities, rather than toys, that concern you, Ubisoft assures us that the world will kick into a higher, busier gear at endgame – and if that's still not enough, *The Division 2* will also introduce raids.

Ubisoft assures us that the world will kick into a higher, busier gear at endgame

It's hard to get a sense of the changes in a demo, but perhaps that's for the best. Massive understands that the point of a sequel is to build on the successes of, and its learnings from, the first game, rather than to reinvent it. That the only real note of caution comes from its setting says a lot. There's a lot about it to like: seven months on from the events of the first game, DC is in midsummer, society is starting to rebuild and in place of that ruined, snowbound New York is a sunny, HDR-flecked landscape that's starting to come together. And if we're honest, at the moment, we'd do anything to escape the modern-day political reality.



OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

Developer Overkill Software **Publisher** 505 Games, Starbreeze **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 8

You sense that Overkill has struggled with this adaptation of Robert Kirkman's comic series. Announced in 2014, it finally made its playable debut at this year's E3, and the landscape has changed significantly since. The TV show is in the doldrums, Telltale is bringing its episodic interpretation to an overdue conclusion, and a fourplayer co-op zombie game is a much harder sell nowadays.

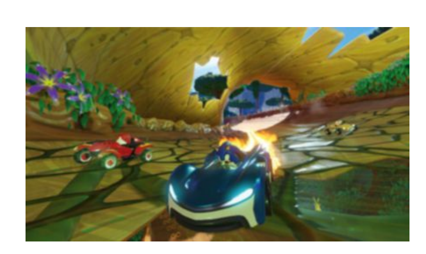
Overkill puts the wait down to the unexpected success of *Payday 2*, which meant it had to staff up to support its co-op bank-heist shooter while also building this. Chances are it's also struggled to find an entertaining balance between working solo or together, against humans or walkers, through stealth or going loud. The gameplay demo does little to inspire confidence either, clunky, rote and unsatisfying. Insert your own Negan joke here.



VALKYRIA CHRONICLES 4

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** September 25

Valkyria Chronicles fans, rejoice: half an hour with this, and we've almost forgotten about the heinous *Valkyria Revolution* altogether. This is a return to form for the tactical WWII fantasy RPG, scrapping the previous instalment's generic realtime action and bringing back the 'Blitz' battle system. There have been some changes: the map we direct our preternaturally pretty troops across is larger, with more cover and a greater variety of strategic routes into battle. You can now have multiple units active at once, and a new long-range Grenadier class proves useful. It helps that *Chronicles 4* looks sumptuous, and that its story runs parallel to the original's: newcomers with an eye for turn-based strategy are served well too. It's something for everybody this time, as opposed to very little for anybody. (We haven't *entirely* forgotten *Revolution*.)



TEAM SONIC RACING

Developer Sumo Digital **Publisher** Sega **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** December

Disappointed as we were at the announcement of a Sumo Digital kart-racing game based exclusively on Sonic, this is a cut above the usual fare. Look past the forgettable cast of characters and you quickly realise that the most important word in the title isn't the famous hedgehog.

This is a team racer, played either with AI or real-life pals. Allies leave a visible slipstream trail that affords a hefty speed boost. Items can be passed between teammates, and will be buffed if you do so. A scoring system based on teamwork, meanwhile, means there's more to consider than who crosses the finish line first. Smart stuff, though we'd expect nothing less from Sumo – and despite our sadness that we won't get to race Ulala round a track in an *Out Run* cabinet in glorious 4K, this is now very much on our radar.



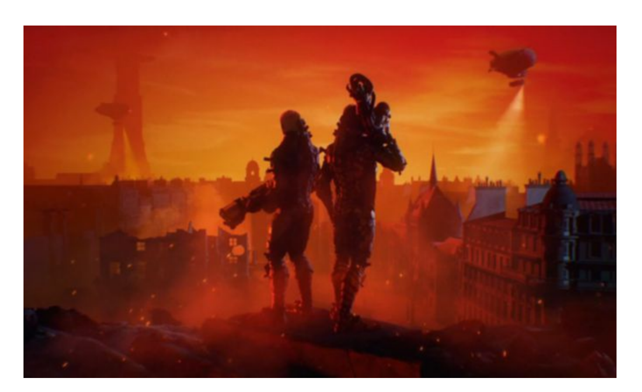
THE ELDER SCROLLS VI

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** TBA **Release** TBA

Finally. Well, we say that – the next instalment in Bethesda's beloved RPG series is years off. With the studio's next project, *Starfield*, still in pre-production – the bulk of the studio will move onto it once *Fallout 76* has shipped – *The Elder Scrolls VI* is a long way off, and clearly intended for the next generation of consoles.

As such, it's little surprise that Todd Howard didn't reveal much about the game. That zoomed-out bit of concept art is probably a fair reflection of the state of *TESVI* at the moment. Yet that hasn't stopped fan communities from concluding that it's set in Hammerfell, in the northwest of Tamriel. The far more pressing question, to our mind, is not where the game will take place, but what Bethesda is building it *in*. The series has long deserved better than the ageing Gamebryo.

In the meantime the announcement offers an opportunity to reflect on how Bethesda has changed since *The Elder Scrolls V* launched in 2011. *Skyrim* was a turning point for the publisher; now it has its own E3 press conference and one of the most enviable release slates in the industry. It has invested creditably in VR, is one of the few major publishers to throw its support behind Switch, and in Howard it has a development rockstar. It is because of all of that that it can afford to leave a decade between instalments of the series on which it made its name.

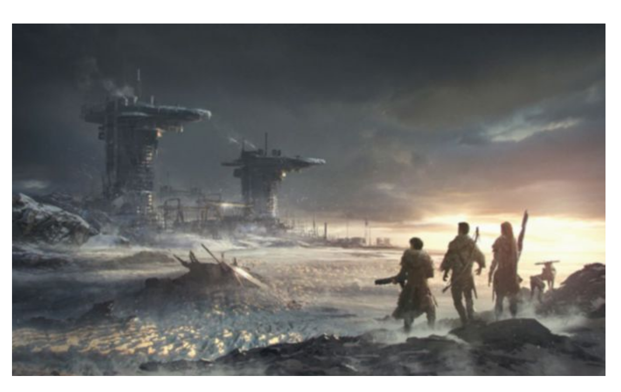


WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

Developer MachineGames **Publisher** Bethesda
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Or, if you prefer, *Wolfenstein: Left Behind*. Bethesda and MachineGames have noticed the potential of a teen-girl coming-of-age story set in a universe that feels entirely inappropriate for one, and the result is *Youngblood*. Taking place 19 years after the events of *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*, it tells of Jess and Soph Blazkowicz, twin daughters of latter-day *Wolfenstein* protagonist BJ.

The twins are in Nazi-occupied Paris and hunting for their missing father. Details are light, but it's already an irresistible concept, made even more so by the fact that it will be playable in co-op. MachineGames is one of the more thoughtful FPS developers, and being able to design encounters around two human players could see the studio elevated to new heights. To the point that, in fact, we're not sure we want the girls to successfully track their father down.



SCAVENGERS

Developer Midwinter Entertainment **Publisher** Improbable
Format PC **Release** TBA

Scavengers is exactly the sort of game you'd expect from a new studio led by Josh Holmes, ex-343 Industries studio head and one of the creators of *Halo 5*'s Warzone mode. Set in a huge, frozen wilderness split across multiple servers with the help of Improbable's SpatialOS tech, it's a multiplayer shooter with exploration and survival elements. Midwinter is calling *Scavengers* a "co-opetition" game, as it pits players against players as well as three AI factions – the animalistic Scourge, the humanoid Outlanders, and the super-evolved Salient. Persistent footprints and a destructible environment (think felling trees to create cover) will add texture to ad-hoc fights, while a Game Director program will observe and make decisions. It's concept art and enthusiastic promises at this stage, but Midwinter has a fine team worth keeping an eye on.



OVERCOOKED 2

Developer Ghost Town Games **Publisher** Team 17 **Format** PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** August 7

Like an often-unnecessary second helping of something too delicious to stop eating comes *Overcooked 2*, the sequel to the great couch co-op title. It pits you and up to three friends against a new enemy, the rising Unbread, in yet another battle to save the world – by working together efficiently to chop, cook, bake and serve as much food as possible.

The changes aren't drastic: they don't need to be. There are fresh recipes to cook, such as sushi and dim sum. You can now throw food across gaps to teammates, an essential skill in one river-rafting kitchen stage. Another hectic level is set in a hot air balloon that crashes halfway through service, and another still is a maze that requires intense communication and traffic control, with whole avenues blocked by fires. In the first game, it was a no-brainer to get the easier orders done quickest, but *Overcooked 2* offers greater reward for sending out dishes in the correct sequence.

We're told fans begged to play with friends remotely, and so *Overcooked 2* will feature an online multiplayer mode. Also, a new emote wheel will help communicate our displeasure when our mate's fry cook accidentally throws a perfectly good plate of fish and chips into the ocean – despite the current and disappointing lack of shorthand for 'idiot sandwich'.



JUMP FORCE

Developer Spike Chunsoft **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

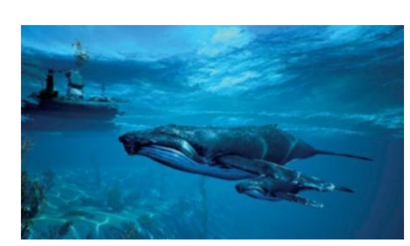
Jump Force is a crossover anime fighter starring characters from such series as Dragonball Z, Naruto and One Piece rendered in unnerving hyperrealism. It's yet another 3D arena brawler out to introduce newcomers to fighting games by showing them where the light-attack button is and then never, ever letting them forget it. We're sure a very specific subset of people will be delighted with it.



GTFO

Developer/publisher 10 Chambers Collective **Format** PC **Release** 2018

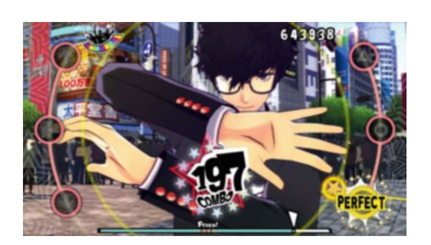
Announced at The Game Awards last year, this co-op zombie-horror shooter from *Payday* designer Ulf Andersson was playable behind closed doors at E3. The story is embedded in the world, and must be sought out and pieced together by players. It's being made by a team of just nine, and Andersson and crew insist you work just as closely together. It's a brutal game at which you are expected to fail.



MANEATER

Developer Blindside Interactive **Publisher** Tripwire Interactive **Format** PC **Release** TBA

You've played videogames as innumerable grizzled men. And at this year's E3, big-budget developers graciously announced they'd allow you to play as a woman. As usual, however, the indie scene is ahead of the curve, giving the people what they really want: an RPG where you play as a giant shark evolving into a predator capable of making Jaws' headline act look an absolute clownfish.



PERSONA 5: DANCING IN STARLIGHT

Developer Atlus, P Studio **Publisher** Sega **Format** PS4, Vita **Release** 2019

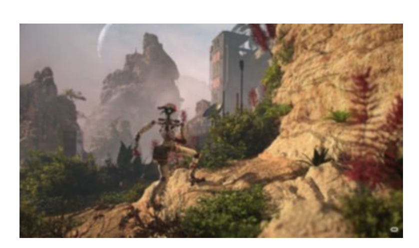
We'll gladly take another *Persona: Dancing* game – or indeed, two, with *Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight* also set for a western release. But it's the stylish cast and acid jazz of *Persona 5* we head for at E3, the familiar six-button rhythm action beating reassuringly beneath our thumbs and reminding us of our poor PS Vita gathering dust back home. Perhaps it's time for one last dance.



STAR WARS: JEDI FALLEN ORDER

Developer Respawn Entertainment **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Unveiled through a terribly stilted EA Play chat with co-founder Vince Zampella, we're yet to see so much as a logo for *Titanfall* developer Respawn's Star Wars game. Zampella says it's set during the dark times, between Episodes Three and Four when the Jedi are being hunted. But can Respawn do what DICE couldn't, and make lightsaber combat as satisfying as it should be?



STORMLAND

Developer Insomniac Games **Publisher** Oculus Studios **Format** Rift **Release** 2019

Insomniac's next foray into VR casts you as an android whose body, and world, are shattered by a cataclysmic event. You must reassemble, and then improve, your body, before heading out to repair your allies. Climbing, flying and gliding, you'll fight off enemy forces, either solo or in online co-op. If the final game matches the visual standard of the trailer, we're in for a treat.



TALES OF VESPERIA: DEFINITIVE EDITION

Developer Namco Tales Studio **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2018

Hideo Baba's long-running JRPG series turns ten this year, giving Namco the only excuse it needs to give it another run-out. In addition to the standard up-res, expect a host of new events, alternate costumes for your party, and a pair of all-new characters: the wonderfully named pirate girl Patty Fleur, and Flynn Scifo, an imperial knight and the protagonist's best pal.



TRANSFERENCE

Developer Spectrevision, Ubisoft Montreal **Publisher** Ubisoft **Format** PC, PS4, PSVR, Rift, Vive, Xbox One **Release** Autumn

While *Transference* will be releasing on traditional platforms, virtual reality is where this psychological thriller will be at its most disturbing. Moving through a house that flickers and glitches between three different perspectives on reality is a deeply unsettling experience. Whether we *enjoy* it is another matter, but masochists, rest assured: this is your next VR endurance challenge.



YAKUZA 0

Developer Yakuza Studio **Publisher** Sega **Format** PC **Release** August 1

One of the biggest, and most pleasant, surprises of the entire show was Sega's confirmation that both this, Kazuma Kiryu's origin story, and *Yakuza Kiwami*, the tarted-up remake of the original game in the series, are headed to PC. With support for up to 4K resolution and an uncapped framerate, these will instantly become the definitive versions of two wonderful games.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY







P R E P A R E T O L I V E

Death is an opportunity in Hidetaka Miyazaki's most punishing game to date

By Nathan Brown



We are sat in a hotel suite high above the madness of E3 when someone asks the only question about *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* that matters. We've just had our first proper look at one of the biggest surprises of the show, a sharp stylistic turn from FromSoftware that is being published by, of all companies, Activision. We've seen an entirely new approach to the studio's signature thirdperson combat that abandons many of the tenets that have characterised From's work over the past decade. We've marvelled at the world, which takes the late-1500s Sengoku, or warring states, period as its stylistic jumping-off point. We're already in love, but with a caveat. The first question from the assembled press gets right to it. Who's the director? "Miyazaki desu," says producer **Yasuhiro Kitao**. "Go anshin kudasai."

It's **Hidetaka Miyazaki**. Don't worry.

That says it all. While few studios on the planet boast so singular an identity as FromSoftware, to its most devout followers it is in effect two companies. It makes FromSoftware games, and it makes Miyazaki games. *Dark Souls II*, developed by a sub-team while Miyazaki was busy with *Bloodborne*, is widely held as the weakest entry in the series. It's all relative, however. Miyazaki's involvement is essentially the difference between a FromSoft game being exceptional and merely brilliant. What we've seen of *Sekiro* gives no indication that streak is about to be broken.

Sekiro is a very different game, for all its similarities to Miyazaki's previous work. The setting is the most immediately obvious, a huge change after the grimy gothic fantasy of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, and the Victorian horror of *Bloodborne*. While this will doubtless change over the course of the game, on first contact this is the brightest, most beautiful world Miyazaki has ever dreamed up. Exaggerated period architecture ("There is no castle in the world that is this ridiculously huge," Kitao says of the towering structure that forms the focal point of our demo) combines with authentic plantlife to create a world that feels more believable than we expect from the

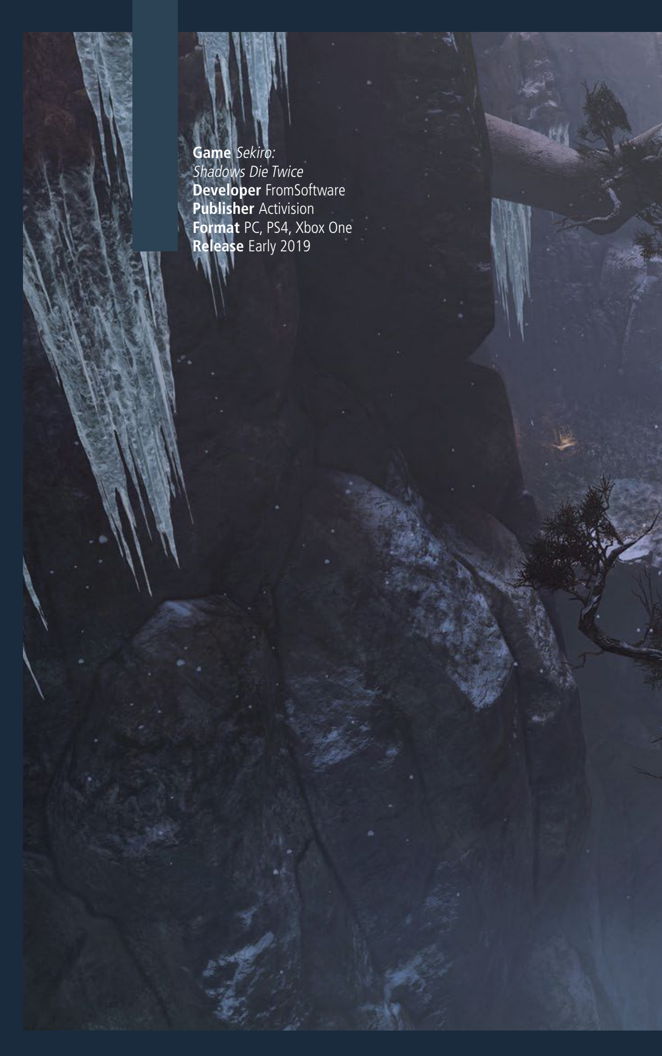
"THERE ARE GOING TO BE SOME THINGS BEYOND HUMAN HIDDEN WITHIN THIS WORLD"

studio. To a point, anyway. The demo boss fight is set on a bridge flanked by Japanese maple trees, its leaves fluttering lazily on the breeze – but the boss is 11 feet tall, and called Corrupted Monk.

"We're not 100 per cent rooted in reality," Miyazaki tells us a day later in a meeting room at E3, away from the hubbub of the show floor (a lifesize statue of the Corrupted Monk greets visitors in the convention centre's South Hall). "Of course it's important to retain a sense of faithfulness, but we're not trying to make a historical depiction of the Sengoku era. While we explored more drastically fantastical elements in our previous games, we want to approach this with a little more dignity this time – a little more carefully, maybe.

"But, rest assured, you're not just going to be fighting humanoids the whole way through. There are going to be some things beyond human, even a little supernatural, hidden within this world. In order to make these fantastical, mystical or even grotesque beings seem even more so, the initial groundwork is a lot more realistic."

In fairness, there's an element of fantasy from the off; for proof you need only look at the protagonist's left arm, a multifunctional ▶



Game *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*
Developer FromSoftware
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release Early 2019



BETTER OFF ALONE

Of all the FromSoft staples to be ditched for *Sekiro*, multiplayer support might just be the most surprising. After all, the studio pioneered a new kind of online play with *Dark Souls*' summoning/invasion system, which featured in *Bloodborne* too. "Dropping multiplayer elements allows us to concentrate our efforts on things we haven't tried before," Miyazaki says. "There's this element of balance you need when you're designing a game based on class systems that has multiplayer at the base of its framework." Not having to worry about that, he says, "means we're [able to focus on] balancing other areas, such as the combat, and the ways you can approach each combat situation, and concentrate on the core singleplayer experience with a fixed protagonist. But I totally understand why players would feel [disappointed]."



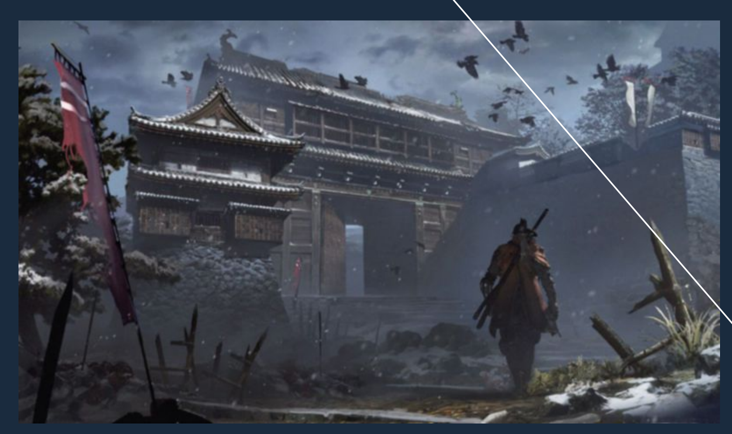


A first-contact demo made for a trade show makes it hard to get a sense of the world and how it fits together, but both Miyazaki and Kitao assure us that FromSoft's approach to map design hasn't changed for *Sekiro*. This will still be a complex, interlocking world with multiple potential routes

LORE AND ORDER

Dark Souls and *Bloodborne* are celebrated for the way they tell – or do not tell – their stories. Lore must be sought out by players, hidden away in dark corners or on the description pages of rare items. Given the switch to a singleplayer action-adventure game with a defined lead character, is Miyazaki abandoning FromSoft's signature approach to storytelling too? "Having a fixed protagonist allows us to base the core story around him, and the main characters around him," he tells us. "We hope that the initial story, at least from the outset, will be easier to grasp and understand. But our general philosophy hasn't changed. It will still be a largely fragmented experience that the player will have to piece together themselves. It's a player-driven experience rather than a story-driven one, and the core story is what's going to be holding all that together. Any more depth that the player wants to find, it's totally up to them. This is not a linear story told entirely through cutscenes."





If the protagonist has a name, From isn't prepared to share it just yet. The game's title means 'one-armed wolf', in part derived from 'sekiwan', an old Japanese word for a person missing a limb

bonework prosthetic that we doubt, if we're honest, was really possible in the late 16th century. Our hero is a ninja in service of a child, the Young Lord. At the beginning of the game, your master is set upon by the Ashina clan (which really was active in the Sengoku period) and captured. During the battle, the protagonist loses his left arm. In its place goes the Shinobi Prosthetic, a device which provides the game with its mechanical heart.

Naturally, we're only shown a few of its uses, but it's already clear this is not only *Sekiro*'s equivalent of *Bloodborne*'s trick weapon – it goes significantly further. A grappling hook, used to flit between fixed points which are highlighted on the HUD, powers a far more vertical approach to level design. Where in From's previous games you might see a high building and have to find a route to its summit, here it's only a button press away. The result is a game, and a world, that you think about in 360-degree terms; yes, there is still an obvious critical path, but with such freedom of movement at your disposal, you'll be able to take less obvious routes that might make things a little easier. We see the ninja avoid rushing a group of enemies head-on by zipping up and through a building to the side.

One Prosthetic tool can also be used to break enemies's shields; another performs a firecracker explosion in an enemy's face, blinding them for a spell. There will be many, many others, we're told, and that's just as well. The Shinobi Prosthetic has big mechanical, and structural, shoes to fill. For all that it adds to the FromSoft formula, much else has been taken away.

"We're using a different grammar for *Sekiro*," Miyazaki says. "It was designed as an action-adventure game, rather than an action-

IT MIGHT JUST BE MIYAZAKI'S MOST BRUTALLY DIFFICULT COMBAT SYSTEM TO DATE

RPG in the same vein as *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne* and the like. This time we don't have a strict class-based system, or make you assign stats into certain parameters and properties – we have something that's designed to fit an action-adventure experience. You will find, for example, new Shinobi Prosthetic tools to equip. You'll collect upgrades. You'll be able to unlock new skills – for example, for how you wield the katana. There will be things that gel nicely with the action-adventure genre."

This is a big departure for Miyazaki and his team, and elicits in us a note of caution. One of the hallmarks of FromSoft's games from *Demon's Souls* onwards is their potential for multiple playthroughs; the way that, by the time you were halfway through your first run through *Dark Souls* or *Bloodborne*, you were already plotting your second. Action-adventures, by and large, do not tend to offer this sort of replay value. Yet FromSoft's fans will expect it. Miyazaki, naturally, is aware of this.

"With the ninja aesthetic, we're trying to go for a multitude of playstyles, of ways to approach the various maps and combat situations. Rather than creating a specific character build, you'll be thinking, 'How could I approach this differently next time?' We're trying to give you a lot of tools, a lot of different methods with which you can approach a variety of tough situations. The ninja is able to use everything in his arsenal effectively, master everything, and then put it to work in unique ways." As for New Game Plus, the studio isn't prepared to talk about it just yet, but Miyazaki wants, for once, to put us all at ease. "Rest assured, there will be something that keeps players engaged for successive playthroughs."

One of the reasons for Miyazaki's confidence that we won't miss character builds is that the protagonist has more options for how to approach encounters. In the *Souls* games and *Bloodborne*, stealth meant getting the drop on a single enemy by creeping up for a backstab, an opportunity that only rarely presented itself. Here, it's ever-present, and frequently essential – right from the off we see our hero skirt around to the side of a mob of enemies to thin out the crowd and deal with the snipers on the perimeter. There's nothing you haven't seen before – one falls to an air assassination from a rooftop that's straight out of the *Assassin's Creed* playbook, likewise a kill from below while we're hanging on a ledge – but in the context of a FromSoftware game it's a gentle revelation, a fundamental change to the way you approach an encounter. There were hints of this in *Bloodborne*, sure; in the way that, early on, you cleared out the streets around a town-centre bonfire, picking off stragglers before taking on the masses. Yet here it's a focal point.

It's also, as the *Assassin's Creed* nod makes clear, a very western style of design. *Sekiro*'s combat also recalls *Uncharted* in the way you let stealth take you as far as you can, then go loud when the jig is up. And there's a moment where our protagonist shimmies across a narrow ledge that bears telltale scratch markings, which we've seen in dozens of games by now. It's tempting at this point to draw a straight line between FromSoft partnering with Activision, and the publisher insisting the studio lean heavily on the western action-adventure playbook in order to reach a wider audience. Miyazaki, however, insists that's not the case.

"We're not consciously trying to make a game that's oriented towards a certain subset of users," he tells us. "We're making games for people that love games. When we first started discussing what this project would be, we decided we wanted to make a game with a Japanese setting. From that stemmed the discussion of ninja. This of course spurred discussion of *Tenchu*, which is a title both From and Activision have a history with [the studio bought the IP rights from the publisher in 2004]. From those ideas – *Tenchu*, Japan, and ninja – come these light stealth mechanics. They just naturally weave themselves into the design."

And if there's a slight sense that From is making, despite the setting, a more western game – and therefore an easier one – our concern melts away as soon as we pick up the pad. Yes, there are familiar bits in there. You can't grapple up to a rooftop before creeping up on a guard for a stealth kill without thinking of Batman, just as you can't leap from a rooftop to plunge a blade into a goon's neck without thinking of Ezio Auditore. But once the fighting starts proper, *Sekiro* is like nothing else. It might just be Miyazaki's most brutal, and most brutally difficult, combat system to date.

It revolves around a new mechanic, Posture, which is best thought in Soulsborne terms as a combination of stamina and the Poise stat (both of which are absent from *Sekiro*). Getting hit by, or simply blocking, an enemy attack depletes your Posture; landing blows, or perfectly parrying an incoming one by tapping block at the last moment, reduces the opponent's. When a fighter's Posture is fully drained, they are stunned, and open to huge damage from a single attack. When the protagonist is on the offense, this is called a Shinobi Death Blow; it will instakill regular grunts, and heavily damage bigger foes (while the current UI is a placeholder, some ▶

tougher enemies have multiple icons under their health bars, seemingly indicating how many Posture breaks are required to kill them).

Simply slashing away doesn't do much; Posture is king, and anyone who heads into battle unprepared to parry isn't going to get on too well. The parry-riposte system is a hallmark of the post-*Demon's Souls* FromSoftware, but it has always been optional, its risk/reward see-saw putting it beyond the reach of all but the most experienced and confident – or cocky – player. Here it is essential, and a logical next step after *Bloodborne*. Miyazaki's 2015 masterpiece urged you onto the front foot, seemingly because the director didn't want players to be able to resort to the *Dark Souls* habit of inching around corners with their shield up. The result was a game of pace and aggression. *Sekiro* is one of grace and perfection, entirely in keeping with its subject matter and at once feeling very much a FromSoftware game, and nothing like one. Not only does blocking get you killed; there's no dodge button either. In its place is a jump manoeuvre which you'll use both to escape danger and create openings by varying your angle of approach.

The fellow holding the controller during that hotel-suite demo makes all this look easy, as you'd expect. Yet when we pick up a pad the following day, we make a quite terrific mess of it. A couple of hundred hours of *Assassin's Creed* experience means we mimic the sniper stealth kills without any difficulty, but as soon as the protagonist draws his sword, it all falls apart. (Miyazaki, perhaps sensing this would happen, has kindly left the room.)

Death comes quickly. It is here that we see the resurrection system, perhaps *Sekiro*'s biggest mechanical change in a game already full of smaller ones, in (embarrassingly repeated) action. Die, and a button prompt appears allowing you to revive on the spot, with full health. While the game's subtitle, *Shadows Die Twice*, implies you can only do it once, we do it five times in a row (look, the samurai general really is a handful) before we finally die for good, the prompt failing to appear and the ninja respawning at the start of the demo.



"PLAYERS ARE GOING TO FEEL LIKE THEY'RE CONSTANTLY AT RISK OF DYING"

From is still working out the finer details of the system, but its use will be limited and will incur a penalty of some kind. Quite what that means for a game whose lack of a *Souls*-style levelling system means currency is immediately less valuable remains to be seen, but again, that's not our first concern. This is a philosophical question for Miyazaki. Again, one sees Activision, publisher of massmarket blockbusters that sell tens of millions of copies, and wonders what role it has had in a Miyazaki game that devalues the traditionally severe punishment for player failure. Yet it also represents an opportunity; if the cost of death is reduced, you can push players even harder. Does resurrection mean Miyazaki is making an easier game? Or is it an excuse for him to make an even harder one?

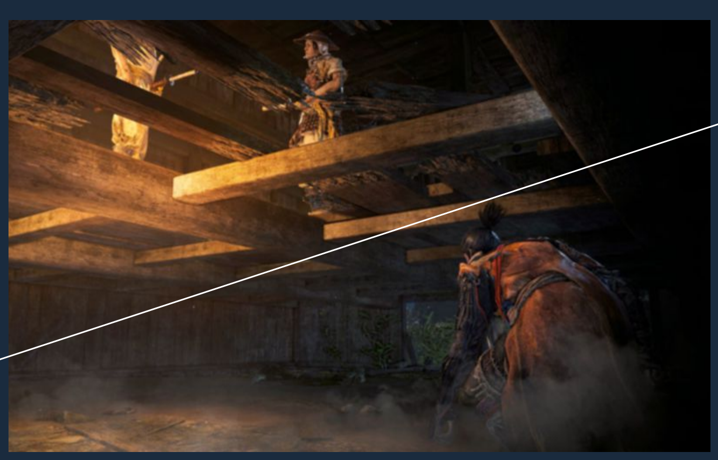
"We have no intention of making an easier game," Miyazaki says, and our heart soars off to the heavens. "When we first approached the idea of a ninja game, we felt like we wanted something that gave the player a more risky sense of battle. They're going to feel like they're constantly at risk of dying. They're not a knight in armour; they're exposed, weak, vulnerable. They need to be constantly on edge.

"This worked a little bit too well! We were dying a *lot*, and it just spoiled the game's tempo. We needed something that would address ▶



***Sekiro*'s subtitle was originally intended solely for the teaser trailer at last year's Game Awards. Activision liked it so much that it asked for it to become the formal subtitle**



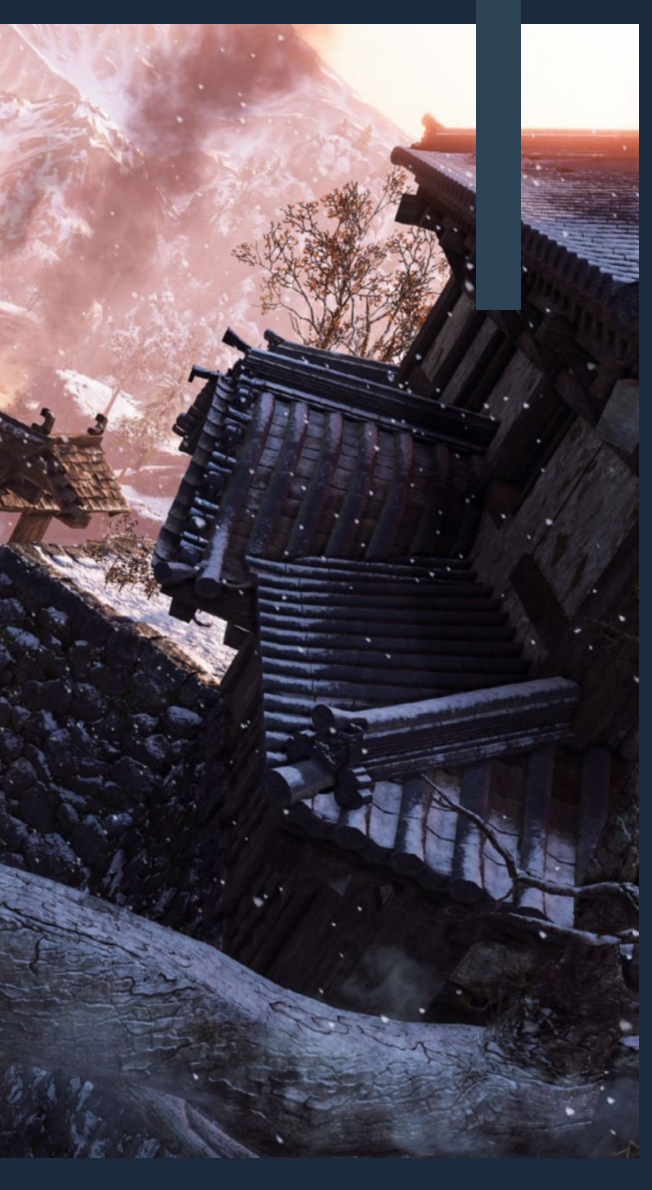


The focus on stealth, as well as the grappling hook, call back to From's history with the *Tenchu* games. Early in preproduction the studio considered reviving the series, but Miyazaki was worried that, since the *Tenchu*s were made by a different set of developers, a reboot would feel too much like an imitation



The game begins with the Young Lord being kidnapped, and the protagonist having his arm chopped off and being killed. "A one-armed sculptor of Buddhist imagery," as Miyazaki describes, revives you, and crafts the Shinobi Prosthetic. It's certainly a more overt narrative setup than we've come to expect from FromSoftware's games





that frequency of death, and the resurrection system did a lot to solve that. We hope that it's not going to be something that makes the game easier; it's not going to numb the player to death. It's going to make them feel they're constantly at death's door. It's something they're going to have to be aware of at every single encounter, and is going to be tuned to that sense of trepidation. And it suits our ninja protagonist quite well. This is a cold-blooded warrior who will use even his own death as an advantage, as a way to turn the tide and gain a strategic advantage."

This is a surprising game in many ways, worlds apart from the FromSoft style guide in setting, structure, systems and even genre. Yet the biggest surprise of all is the publisher; when its logo appeared, right after From's, during *Sekiro*'s announcement trailer at the Microsoft conference, there were gasps in the auditorium. We don't really associate Activision with this sort of game; it makes bankers, not deeply punishing action games from Japanese studios with a cult following and a softography filled with some of the most famously difficult games around. Yet Miyazaki says that, when From was pitching *Sekiro*, Activision was the most enthusiastic; since the deal was signed he has come to appreciate what an operation of its size can offer a modestly sized studio in terms of support and advice.

Crucially, a new publisher means an opportunity for a new IP. No doubt Sony would love a *Bloodborne II*. Bandai Namco would happily have let Miyazaki make a new *Dark Souls* game every two years until he retired. Yet we have often got the sense that the director is less interested in sequels than he is in making something new. He skipped *Dark Souls II* to make *Bloodborne*, after all, and *Dark Souls III*, for all its glory, gave the sense of a creator who had had enough of the series and wanted to tie it all up for good. Does he find new IP more creatively fulfilling?

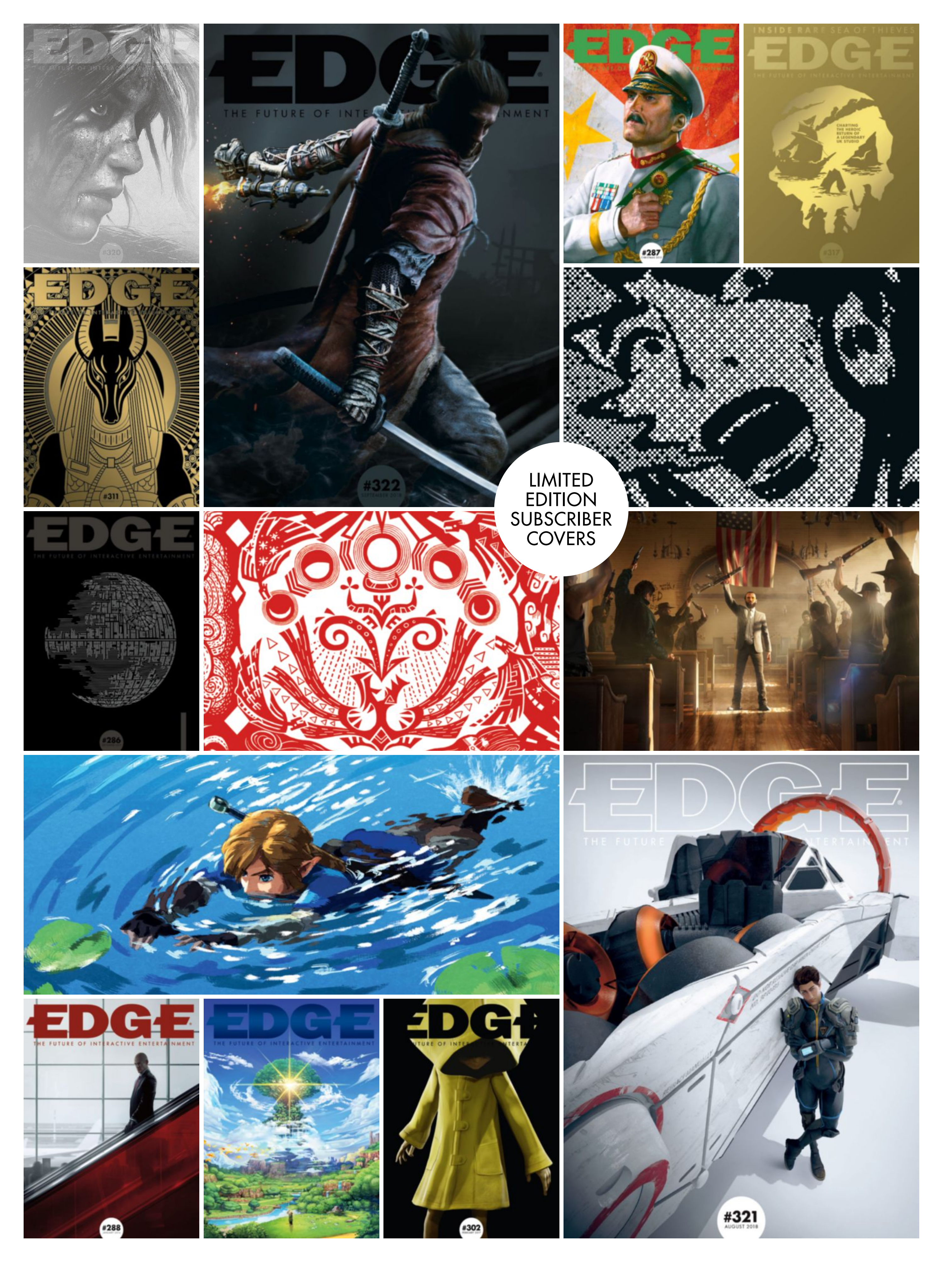
"A BRAND-NEW IP LIKE SEKIRO ALLOWS ME AND THE TEAM A LOT MORE CREATIVE FREEDOM"



Miyazaki chose the Sengoku period for the game's setting because the combat of the era was raw and dirty, chiming with his personal impression of ninja

"Personally, I have no preference," he says. "That largely comes down to the business decision in the end – to what everyone [involved] wants to do. Personally I think both have their merits. A brand-new IP like *Sekiro* allows me and the team a lot more creative freedom to try new ideas. But a sequel is equally as fun because it allows me to refine existing ideas, to improve things that I maybe regretted doing not so well the first time around. As both a creator and a player, there's this level of creativity that means both [new IP and sequels] are on equal ground."

Well, perhaps. But we know which we prefer. Miyazaki insists, despite its reputation having gone from strength to strength over the past decade – its having made one of the finest trilogies in videogame history in *Dark Souls* and PS4's greatest exclusive in *Bloodborne*, and it now partnering with the biggest thirdparty publisher on the planet – that FromSoftware hasn't changed that much over the years. He was appointed company president in 2014 ("I have a bit more work," he smiles), but still retains an active role in every component of the games he directs. And you can tell. There is a distinct otherness to his work. And in the context of an E3 at which the industry seemed a little comfortable – slipping a little too safely into an easy next-gen groove – *Sekiro* stands out a mile, gleaming like a blade in the burning sun. ■


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THE MAKING OF...



LITTLE NIGHTMARES

How Tarsier curbed its creative hunger by daring to step out alone

By Chris Schilling

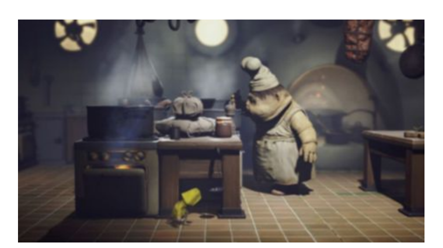
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Developer Tarsier Studios
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Origin Sweden
Release 2017

One of *Little Nightmares*' many blood-freezing moments comes during its final act, chillingly turning the player's expectations on their head. Creeping around the quarters of an improbably tall, impossibly thin woman – referred to simply as The Lady – tiny, frail protagonist Six must smash a vase to obtain a key. By now, the player has come to expect any loud noises to prompt a clatter of footsteps as someone – or something – arrives to investigate, and will surely have hidden themselves accordingly. Instead, they're greeted by an eerie silence, The Lady's insistent, melodic humming having suddenly stopped. Eventually plucking up the courage to step out, Six emerges from her hiding place, only to find… nothing.

With hindsight, this sequence seems to reflect the understandable anxieties of a team releasing its first original property. *Little Nightmares* wasn't Tarsier Studios' debut, by any means: the Malmö-based developer had enjoyed a fruitful association with Sony for several years, working on DLC for three *LittleBigPlanet* games, as well as the series' Vita entry and expanded remake *Tearaway Unfolded*. Various prototypes had been floating around the studio for some time (including unreleased adventure *The City Of Metronome*) but at the beginning of 2014, it finally had an idea it could make its own.

A few months later, that idea had a title: *Hunger*. A year on, Tarsier released a terrific, appetite-whetting teaser. Then, like The Lady's chambers, everything went quiet. It wasn't until August 2016 that *Hunger* returned, the studio having inked a publishing deal with Bandai Namco. Only now it had a new title, sharing part of its name with the series Tarsier had just left behind. Was this a matter of brand recognition? "I think it was quite the opposite, actually," senior narrative designer **Dave Mervik** tells us. "We were actually worried about calling it *Little Nightmares* because it felt like people would think we were just trading off that, which wasn't the case. You should have seen the amount of Post-Its we stuck up on the wall when we were trying to come up with a new title." Either way, sticking with what it already had was off the table – *Hunger* was not, after all, a particularly search-engine-friendly title. "Such a sexy reason for changing it," Mervik laughs.

Figuring out what to call it was a particular bone of contention, and not just for the title itself.



Tarsier wanted to get the most from its antagonists, as long as their presence made sense. "One of my focus points was: do we have enough space for these characters?" Larsson says

Concerned about how its game would be perceived, Tarsier was keen not to mislead anyone. "We were dead against calling it a horror back then," Mervik says. "With horror you get all that baggage – people expect something like *Resident Evil* or *Dead Space*, zombies or demons or whatever." Knowing it was aiming for something smaller, subtler, creepier, Tarsier tried

"WE WERE DEAD AGAINST CALLING IT A HORROR BACK THEN. WITH HORROR YOU GET ALL THAT BAGGAGE"

to find another way to describe it. "It had platforming elements, exploration and stuff," Mervik continues. "But if you say you're making a platformer, that's totally wrong, too." Eventually, the studio settled on 'suspense adventure'. "And then, of course, all reviews said it was a horror platformer," producer **Henrik Larsson** laughs.

One name, however, was conspicuously absent from first impressions of the game. "No one compared us to *Luigi's Mansion*, did they?" Mervik says, "Weirdly." And yet Nintendo's game prompted a quiet revelation during development: creative lead Dennis Talajic arrived at work the following morning having played it the previous night, deciding that *Little Nightmares* should adopt a similar dollhouse-style perspective. There was another key reference point, too: Hifumi Kono's horror-themed point-and-click *Clock Tower*. "That was probably a closer source of inspiration, at least in terms of the suspense elements," Mervik says. "In the original *Clock Tower*, you didn't have those classic escape mechanisms from other horror games. At one point, you had a limp and had to walk very slowly – subtle things like that create tension." And though it wanted to distance itself from its past work in some respects, the studio's time with *LittleBigPlanet* certainly helped inform the physicality of this new world – even if, in keeping with the game's weightier themes, Six felt significantly less floaty than Sackboy.

Artist Jonas Steinick Berlin, meanwhile, produced the original concept for what would become *Little Nightmares*' setting: a seabound resort called The Maw, designed to cater to a corpulently wealthy clientele. "We were sitting in a little room thinking about a kind of Petri dish where you could put people in and imagine how they'd evolve over hundreds of years," Mervik says. "That isn't quite what it ended up being, but that's where the germ of that idea came from. We imagined what the worst of people could become and how they would look."

The answer, inevitably, is revolting. Each of The Maw's inhabitants is either too tall or too wide – sometimes both. Their physical characteristics are stretched and exaggerated, transforming them into grotesque caricatures and making them all the more threatening. "We'd think of a character you could have a simple relationship with, like a chef or a janitor," senior character artist **Kristofer Ling** elaborates. "And then we'd take any features that could be perceived as scary by a child and crank them up to 11 – in the way a nightmare would maybe transform something that is slightly scary in real life to something *really* scary in your dreams."

With his almost comically elongated arms, perfect for reaching all the way back into seemingly safe hiding spots, it's The Janitor that provides the early chills. But it was *Little Nightmares*' grubby, porcine chefs who came first, tying into the central theme of hunger – from the belt-busting gluttony of the bloated guests in the dining area to Six's desperate cravings. The rest came as a result of practical thinking: which other roles would need to be filled in a place like this? "There needed to be some kind of leader, or someone driving this whole thing," Ling says. "And then it's, well, who takes care of this place? Maybe we can have a janitor who takes care of the pests and cleans up the ▶

mess. The rest of the characters came from there. Everyone had to have some kind of purpose."

Even before Tarsier's artists began bringing these monstrous creations to life, an early prototype convinced the studio it was on the right track. "The very first enemy was this tall purple block," Mervik recalls. "We built this basic labyrinth like *Takeshi's Castle* where you've got all these different doors to run through. And that was it. You'd be walking through and suddenly a purple block would come after you. We got people screaming at that, so we thought, 'OK, we're onto something here, then!'"

The finished game is much more than a series of pursuits, of course. From stealth sequences to physics-led conundrums, each room represents a puzzle of sorts. Suspense requires a sense of trepidation, but also curiosity – that desire to find out what lies beyond a locked door, or within a dark shadow. As such, Tarsier was keen not to lead players by the hand: to let them discover The Maw's secrets, by turns intriguing and disgusting, without any prompting. "I think we were in agreement with Bandai about this," Larsson nods. "Everybody is a bit fed up right now with too much tutorialising in games. We believed the people who would enjoy this game would be the sharper tools in the box; that they should be clever enough to figure out most things."

Which isn't to say Tarsier didn't try a more instructional approach – though Larsson quickly discovered that playtesters learned the controls better without any assistance. "Whether it's a slide or a grab or whatever, it would always stick more if people figured it out by themselves," he says. Still, wary that confusion and fear aren't exactly compatible, the studio settled upon a compromise. "We do have tutorials in there," Larsson admits. "It's just that they don't show up unless you get really stuck. When it's puzzle gameplay, we have fewer hints. But if it's an important chase scene, we make sure that players can react instinctively so they feel like they've managed to do it on their own, even though we're guiding them slightly in the background. It's a fine balance but I think it ended up feeling pretty natural."

As it continued to build its world of unpleasant surprises, Tarsier received one of its own. When development began, its concept had seemed, if not quite unique, then at least something out of the ordinary. But in the meantime, another Scandinavian studio was also preparing to release a tense, side-scrolling suspense adventure featuring a vulnerable young character in a hostile world. So did Playdead's *Inside* cast a long shadow? "We absolutely paid attention to it," Larsson says. "I mean, *Limbo* was already one of our inspirations. Then this one came out and we were really excited to play it for ourselves and see what they did. But of course it was a bit scary, because there were a lot of similarities."

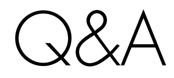
"I think we might have actually gained from it," Ling adds. "Because it was a similar game that was really great, and that might have created a hunger – " he pauses briefly as Larsson and Mervik cheer his inadvertent pun, "for more games like it. I think it was different enough that if you liked *Inside* you'd also like *Little Nightmares*. You're *always* going to be compared to something. So I'm quite happy to be compared to *Inside*."

Indeed, the comparisons ultimately seemed to do *Little Nightmares* little harm. The game's opaque storytelling and interpretive ending prompted a flurry of online discussion and the broader player response convinced the studio to expand the story. Additional episodes had been mooted during development, and Tarsier had already spitballed ideas for bonus chapters featuring new characters, and considered where they might fit into the story. "But it wasn't until the end of development when we saw the public reaction that we decided we needed to make some more of this," Larsson says.

Not everyone was quite so positive, though Tarsier had anticipated a few outliers – it wasn't intending to cater to all players. "Even if it sucks when you read a scathing review, it also means you're not hitting that lowest common denominator," Mervik says. "I think if you work that way – 'If we do this and do that, we hit this target demographic and our market research tells us that this will make for a 90+ game' – ugh. Who makes games like that? You've got to trust what you think is going to be cool and hope there's people out there who think that as well." Ling agrees. "We had to be brave and take decisions that we believed in, decisions that hadn't been completely proven by other games before. We figured that if we were going to fail, we at least wanted to fail on our terms."

It was that collective belief in its ideas that enabled Tarsier to overcome its natural early fears. In fact, Larsson admits, that tension may have brought the best out of the studio. "We said that we had to prove ourselves, otherwise what would be the point?" he says. "Sure, we'd made some nice prototypes before and some people were psyched about them, but we'd never managed to fulfill them or push them all the way through."

This time, Tarsier managed to reach the finish line – though *Little Nightmares*' race may not be run just yet. Asked whether he'd like to revisit the world, Larsson turns the question around. "Do you think it's the end of the story?" He laughs, and offers a little more. "We would love to continue working with it. You never know what's in the future." Either way, it's clear that whatever Tarsier faces from now on, it won't be as daunting as those courageous first steps out from the shadows. ■



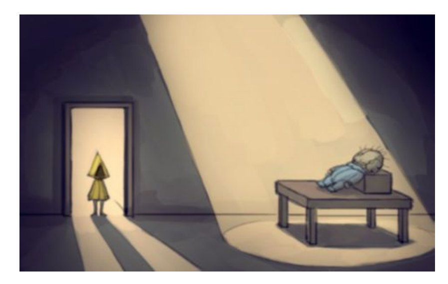
Dave Mervik
Senior narrative designer, *Little Nightmares*

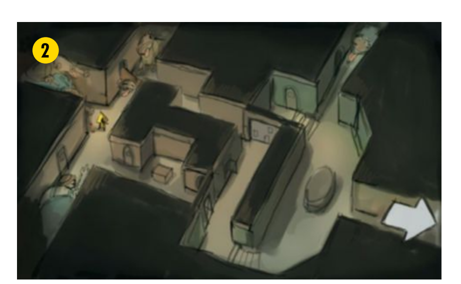
Six's yellow raincoat really stands out. When did you settle on the main character's design?
It was actually very early on. It was always going to be very simple shapes so you could recognise this character from a distance; so you could see a silhouette and know who it was. We knew that inside The Maw it was going to have these very grimy, organic tones. You can get an idea of a character and where they do or don't belong, just from really simple decisions like the colour and the shape of a coat.

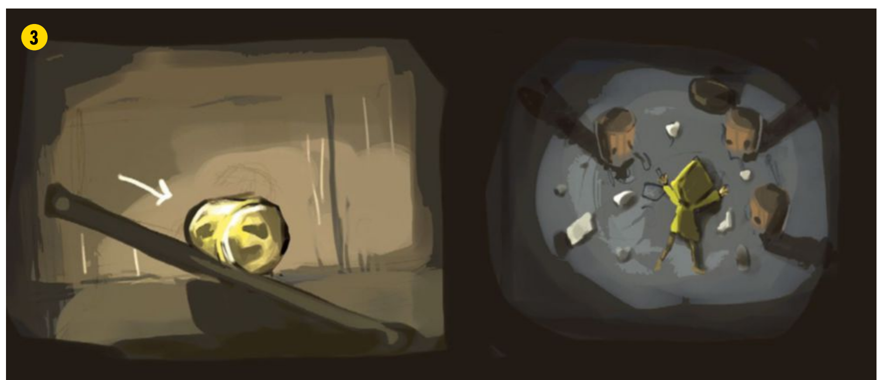
Did you always plan to leave the ending open to the player's interpretation?
Yeah, that was always there from the beginning, too. With the game design you want players to figure things out for themselves, and we wanted to have that same ethos with the story as well. There was never any pressure [from the publisher] to make things clearer because everyone was on the same page with that. That's not the game we were making. We were making it so people had to think for themselves, whether it was what the visuals meant, what the gameplay was like, or what the story was. It feels like people have really bought into it, as well.

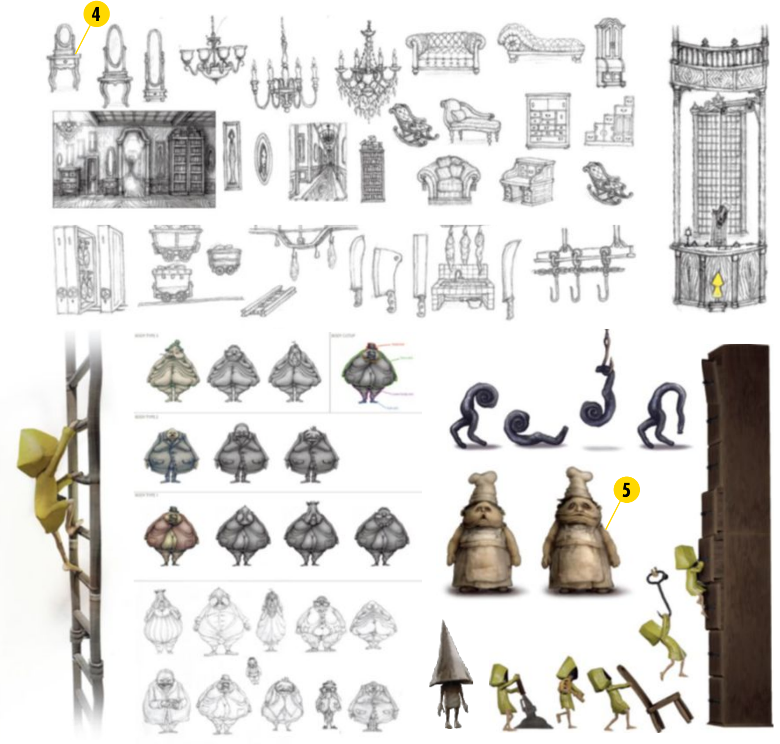
You released *Statik* around the same time. Did the development of *Little Nightmares* affect that in any way?
To be honest, a lot of people don't even know it's the same company that made it! There were no knock-on effects for either game, really – it was just a great time where we were getting to do two things instead of one. We had this dream, and then we were like, 'Oh, let's also make a VR game'.







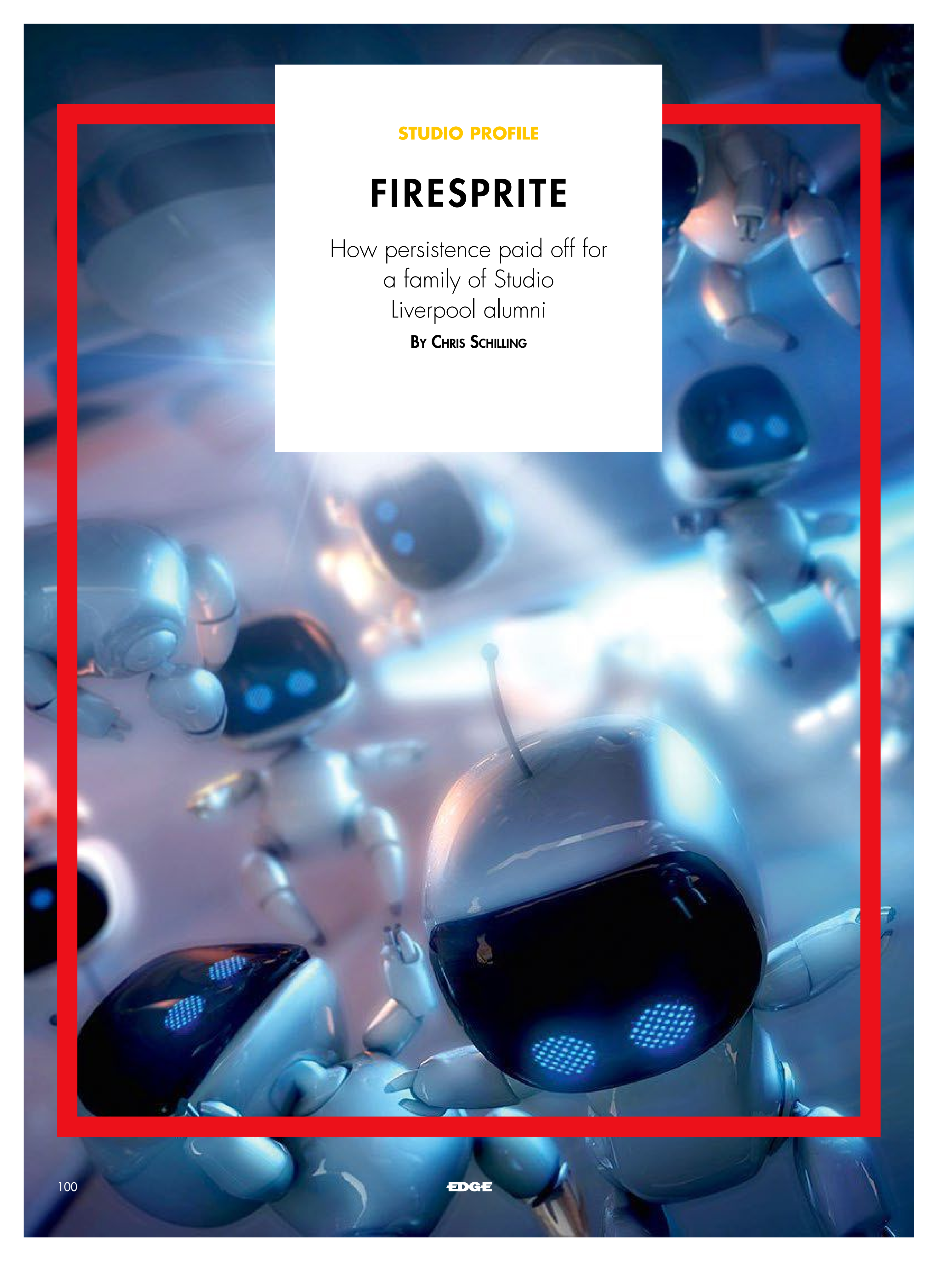






❶ Six's lighter isn't solely used to illuminate *Little Nightmares*' gloomier areas, but also to light lanterns – the game saves when you do this, though strictly speaking they're not quite checkpoints.
❷ An early gameplay concept for the late-game chase sequence where The Maw's ravenous patrons crawl over each other to hunt down Six.
❸ Concepts for sequences involving Roger the long-armed Janitor, including an early look at the Nomes, the timid but benign creatures that Six can embrace to befriend.
❹ A range of furniture and environment sketches from the latter half of the game, featuring the food hall and The Lady's quarters.
❺ The chefs see Six as a rat to be exterminated, moving in with a speed that belies their bulk. Larsson: "The size of the [hostile] characters really helped us sell the creepiness of it all, because our main characters are all small, and so the difference is so much greater"





STUDIO PROFILE

FIRESPRITE

How persistence paid off for a family of Studio Liverpool alumni

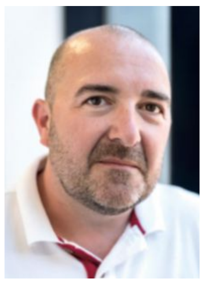
By Chris Schilling

As a natural optimist, Firesprite's **Stuart Tilley** didn't see the closure of Studio Liverpool coming. But then why would he? Despite suffering a few rounds of redundancies in previous years, the developer seemed in reasonable shape. It had just released *Wipeout 2048*, one of the biggest-selling and best-reviewed of PS Vita's launch line-up, and was prototyping future projects when the axe suddenly fell, calling time on one of the UK game industry's most enduring successes. "It seemed so seismic for such a long-running studio, one that had some really talented people and had just made yet another hit launch title to be closed," Tilley says. "You normally get a sense when something's going to go down," Firesprite's art director **Lee Carus** adds. "People start saying to you, 'Is everything okay?' or, 'I've heard a few things'. But there was none of that."

There was only one possible response to such bad news. "Everyone piled down the pub," Tilley recalls. "Whatever time we started – lunchtime, early afternoon – we stayed there until closing and got…" He's interrupted by Carus – "It was absolutely magnificent," – and they both laugh. "It shouldn't have been, but it was one of the best nights out we've ever had," he continues. "We all went there to try and right the wrongs of the world, then decided, well, we're not going to fix anything here, so let's just carry on."

It may have left Tilley with a two-day hangover, but as unlikely as it sounds, the session proved to be a pivotal moment. The studio's managers hadn't made plans for a closure, but as friends they had privately discussed the possibility of doing their own thing at some stage; the end of Studio Liverpool merely accelerated the process. There was, after all, a wealth of local talent now on the market, many of whom had children settled in schools. For these people, the idea of uprooting their family to move overseas would have been unthinkable. "If ever there was a time," Tilley says, "This was the time to do it."

From a practical standpoint, a new studio built around the same core of staff made sense. But there was an emotional logic behind keeping the gang together, too. This didn't seem like a group of people who had just lost their jobs. "It felt – I know this is a bit cheesy – but the studio had a family vibe about it," Tilley says. "Everyone was really close. And sure, that happens elsewhere, but it was a really positive place. And so the thought of carrying it on in a different guise…we thought, 'We're having a great time so let's just keep it going a bit longer'."

Stuart Tilley (left) and Lee Carus stayed at Studio Liverpool until the final day. Tilley: "When you work in games, nothing's ever too surprising when it comes to this sort of thing"

So: Firesprite. Was the name inspired by that desire to keep the creative flame burning? Carus laughs. "You know what? If it makes a good story, I'll say yes. It's totally not, but…" Tilley sighs: "We spent *ages* talking about names. It was ridiculous. We'd had advice not to worry about it, to work on our core business, but in the downtime we talked about different names and had loads of suggestions." The directors put signs up around the office with the potentials, and asked everyone to pick the names they liked and disliked. The most popular – or least hated – was Tilley's own pick, and Firesprite was officially born. This was, however, some months later. Just a few days after the closure announcement, programming director Stuart Lovegrove had offered his flat as a spot for regular get-togethers between the would-be founders. "Within a few days we were set up on WhatsApp, we had a chat and said: 'Let's go for it'," Tilley says. "Stu's flat was our little working office at least once a week for the next few months. I basically did office hours there, working on design concepts and stuff because I wanted to make it feel real, to not be sat bored at home and suddenly apply for another job."

Firesprite didn't have long to wait for its own first gig, though it would involve working with the very company that had shuttered Studio Liverpool. Managing director Graeme Ankers had maintained strong ties with Sony, and so Tilley, Carus and company found themselves helping the publisher's Japan Studio with art support for *The Playroom*, Sony's free showcase for the PlayStation Camera. Was there any lingering resentment? Tilley shakes his head. "We'd been around the block enough to know it was just the way these things go sometimes. You can't let that stuff burn away at you: it doesn't serve any purpose at all." Carus agrees. "I only went there the other day to pick up some hardware, and I remember thinking that 98 percent of my memories of this place are nothing but positive," he elaborates. "So it was a very comfortable transition to start working with those guys, albeit from a different perspective."

Besides, everyone at Firesprite still considered themselves PlayStation fanboys: they had, all things considered, spent many years of their careers making firstparty games for various Sony platforms. "That stuff really puts you on the frontline of the console war," Tilley explains. "So they were still our team, if you like." And this was no ordinary work-for-hire gig, anyway. Studio Liverpool had always prided itself on using technology in creative new ways, and the opportunity to work with a brand new piece of hardware was too appealing to miss. "This was a really cool thing to do, and we were really excited about it because it was the same kind of creative angle we'd been pushing the last five or six years at Studio Liverpool," Tilley says.

"THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH A BRAND NEW PIECE OF HARDWARE WAS TOO APPEALING TO MISS"

There may, he concedes, have been an element of sympathy – perhaps tinged with a little guilt, even – in Firesprite getting the gig, though he's confident it had more to do with the studio's track record: it had already proven it was a safe pair of hands, and it knew the hardware pretty much inside out. To repay Sony's faith, the team doubled its efforts, and Firesprite's directors were delighted with the results. In fact, it was only a



Founded 2012
Employees 75
Key staff Stuart Tilley (co-founder, game director), Lee Carus (co-founder, art director), Graeme Ankers (co-founder, managing director), Stuart Lovegrove (co-founder, programming director)
URL www.firesprite.com
Selected softography *The Playroom, Run Sackboy! Run!, The Playroom VR*
Current projects *The Persistence*





Carus: "We were honoured that so many of the [Studio Liverpool] guys choose to come with us. And we've got more with us now than we did at the start." Since then, the studio's numbers have, impressively, swelled to 75, and it's looking to expand further

month into development of *The Playroom* that another offer landed on its doormat. Keen to exploit the popularity of Media Molecule's hand-stitched mascot, Sony invited Firesprite to work on *LittleBigPlanet*-themed endless runner, *Run Sackboy! Run!* – the team's first mobile game. The two games were developed concurrently by separate teams. "It was an amazing time," Tilley says, "but it was certainly hard graft for a while."

By the time Studio Japan came calling once more for help with *The Playroom VR*, Firesprite had begun to prototype a game of its own. VR horror roguelike *The Persistence* is, Tilley says, the kind of game he and his colleagues have been wanting to make since their time together at Studio Liverpool. "We've known each other for like 15, 20 years, and we'd always talked about how it'd be really cool to do a firstperson sci-fi game at some point. Graeme had often talked about wanting to work on a horror game as well, and this felt like a perfect opportunity for it."

It would, we venture, have been much easier to start again with something more familiar. The team from *Wipeout* making a futuristic racing game – that surely sells itself. In fact, even with diverse individual histories – *Killzone*, *Battlefield* and the *Lego* games are among the series its staffers have worked on – Firesprite was already becoming known as 'the *Wipeout* studio'. Was there a temptation to return to the type of game with which it had established its reputation? "We did talk about it," Tilley says, "but it was a pretty short conversation. Unless you can come up with something earth-shatteringly new for the racing genre… We were worried it would have just been *Wipeout* without the name. So we thought, you know what? We've got passions to do other things. And so we decided to come out of the gates in a completely different direction."

Firesprite's decision to flex its creative muscles meant that there were some new tricks for these old dogs to learn – though the studio's time on *The Playroom VR* helped it figure out what worked and what didn't in terms of virtual-reality visuals. And yet, once development on that game had been completed and the art team moved over to *The Persistence*, it faced a unique challenge. "We were basically asking these artists to change mindset overnight," Carus tells us. "We'd say to them, 'So you know those cute robots you've been working on? Well, we're now going for VR horror in space.'"

Inevitably, the shift created a few problems, with character artists producing designs that simply weren't scary enough. "We had a few good examples of concept art coming through for some of the weapons, that looked like *slightly* meaner versions of something you'd find in *The Playroom*," Tilley adds. "There's six to eight images of them becoming more and more what Lee and I described as 'agricultural'. It was only a few weeks, but it was fascinating." Perhaps, we suggest, Firesprite could combine the two, putting *The Playroom*'s robots into *The Persistence*'s procedural environments as enemies. "That'd be really creepy, actually," Carus says. "I'm not entirely sure Sony would go for that!" Tilley laughs.

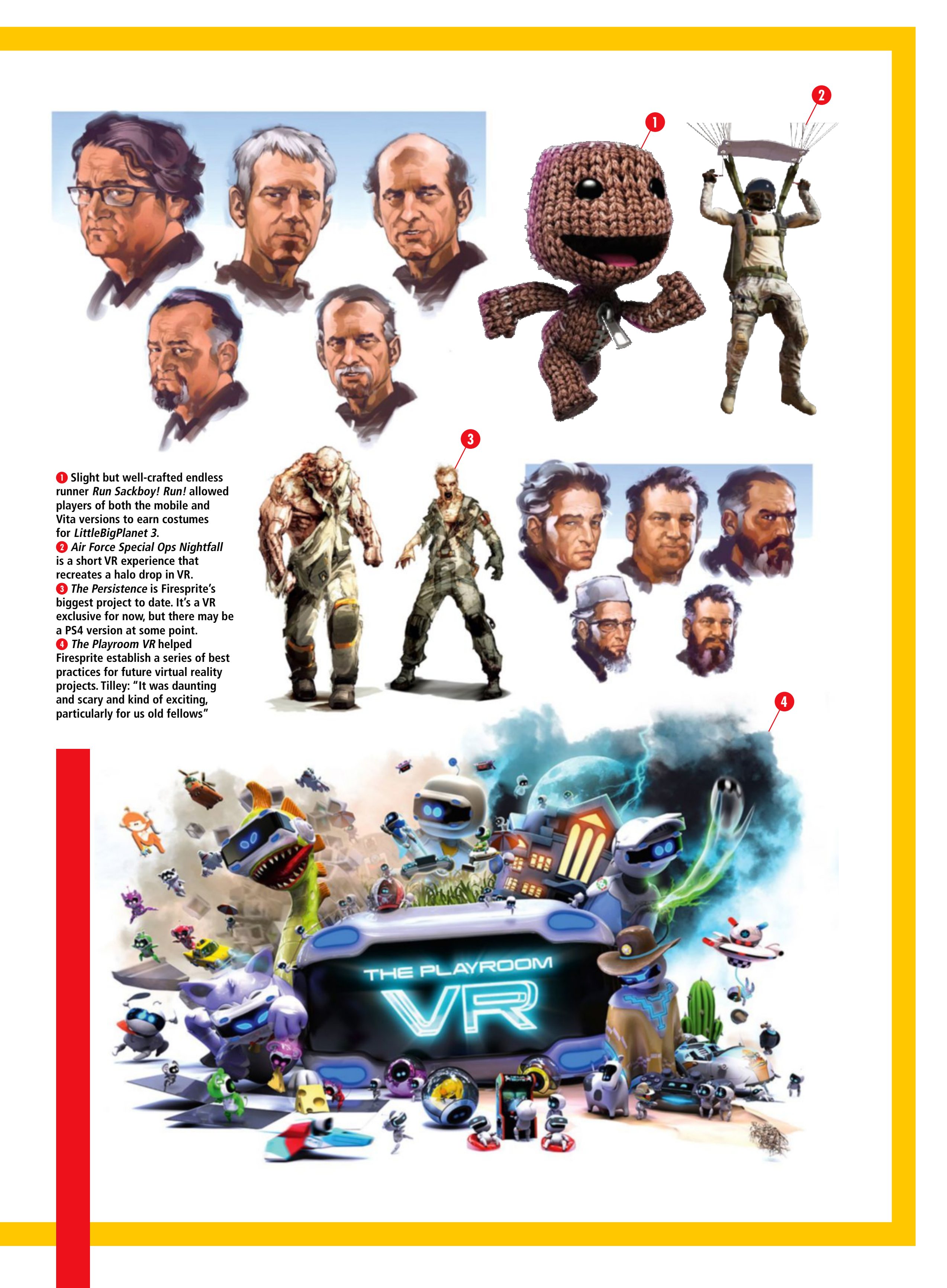
The game itself has taken slightly longer than anticipated, partly thanks to old habits dying hard. After years of growing accustomed to pushing hardware to its limits – and being encouraged by its former publisher to spend extra time polishing games – Firesprite has belied its resources to produce a game that looks like it came from a much bigger studio, at much higher cost. It's even used the mobile knowhow it picked up from *Run Sackboy! Run!* to introduce an unusual co-operative mode: a second player can use their phone or tablet to help or hinder the headset wearer. No prizes for guessing which approach most of the game's testers took.

As we speak to the pair, *The Persistence* is mere days from going gold. This may be the most stressful time of any game's development, but it's clear this has been an enjoyable project to work on, and the sense of pride in what Firesprite has achieved is palpable. Indeed, the studio is already considering future projects. "We're grasping this opportunity with both hands, and we hope it's a genre we can stay in for a little while," Tilley says. Does he mean VR or firstperson horror?

"WE'RE GRASPING THIS OPPORTUNITY WITH BOTH HANDS, AND WE HOPE IT'S A GENRE WE CAN STAY IN FOR A WHILE"

"I'd say both," he replies. "Definitely sci-fi horror. But we love making games for VR: it gives you so much creatively in terms of making more immersive games, and that's what we're about."

Yet Firesprite is about much more besides. Tilley immediately reveals the studio is working on four more projects, including one set for non-Sony hardware – though it has every intention to continue its fruitful relationship with the platform-holder. All four games are in different stages of development, though they share one common factor: a willingness to try something new. "We've tried hard to stick to our principles of making sure each game we take on has a cool and unique angle," he explains. "Whether it's a technical or a creative twist, we want our games to have standout elements that no one's ever really done before – just because we buzz off it." ■



❶ Slight but well-crafted endless runner *Run Sackboy! Run!* allowed players of both the mobile and Vita versions to earn costumes for *LittleBigPlanet 3*.
❷ *Air Force Special Ops Nightfall* is a short VR experience that recreates a halo drop in VR.
❸ *The Persistence* is Firesprite's biggest project to date. It's a VR exclusive for now, but there may be a PS4 version at some point.
❹ *The Playroom VR* helped Firesprite establish a series of best practices for future virtual reality projects. Tilley: "It was daunting and scary and kind of exciting, particularly for us old fellows"

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit
PS4
Designed to bridge the gap between the first *Life Is Strange* and the forthcoming sequel, *Captain Spirit* is a short, bittersweet tale about a Saturday morning in the life of imaginative would-be superhero Chris. It's Dontnod at its most Dontnod – a little hammy, but heartfelt and authentic – and its strong sense of identity and charming new ideas assure us that the series has plenty more creative avenues to explore.

Stardew Valley
Switch
We've sometimes found this farming sim's obsession with strict schedules and levelling up quite tedious when compared to the free-wheeling *Animal Crossing*. But there's still no sign of a Switch outing, and *Stardew*'s clearly defined goals offer a better conduit for post-E3 adrenaline anyway: we juggle relationships, blueberry-farming and animal husbandry in a cathartic frenzy. One week and 25 hours later, we're finally starting to feel relaxed again (hint hint, Nintendo).

Lumines Remastered
Switch
Nintendo Of Europe doesn't give out download codes until the 11th hour, so our first sit down with Tetsuya Mizuguchi's music puzzler in years is on PS4 – and as expected, it still doesn't feel right on a big screen. A Switch version arrives before long, and is exactly as we dreamed it – with some bonus Trance Vibrator-style intensity finally putting our spare Joy-Cons to use.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

Great expectations

This month's Play is something of a cautionary tale. It turns out that there's often a large gulf between what we all think will make for an excellent videogame, and what actually works in the context of one. You might wish for a driving game set in an edited-down, more easily explorable version of the USA. You may fancy a theme park simulator where dinosaurs are the headline attraction, or an RPG in which you play as a charismatic and powerful vampire. To which we say: be careful what you wish for.

It turns out, for example, that the shrinky-dink America of *The Crew 2* (p106) isn't as neat a solution as it initially seems. In the attempt to circumvent the tedious trappings of having to drive endless real-life miles, Motornation has become uncanny, filled with algorithmically generated signs advertising 'Chicken grilled coffee' and weird approximations of iconic locales – to reduce Los Angeles to its convention centre is a sad thing indeed (although the pot might be calling the kettle black, here).



Elsewhere, *Jurassic World: Evolution* (p110) stands as an unfortunate example of reality not quite meshing with fantasy. While we expect for our carefully constructed parks to fall, as is the way of the Jurassic series, to dino-induced pandemonium, thin simulation means that the chaos boils down to going through the same repetitive motions. *Vampyr* (p114) suffers a similar fate: the tension of choosing between killing and sparing NPCs is undermined by one option being relatively simple and more rewarding, rendering the choice – and an entire portion of the game – moot.

Unsuitable ideas, poor execution, or a combination of the two? Hard to say – but perhaps it's time for players and designers to put the monkey's paw down, and start thinking more practically.

The Crew 2

Developer Ivory Tower
Publisher Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

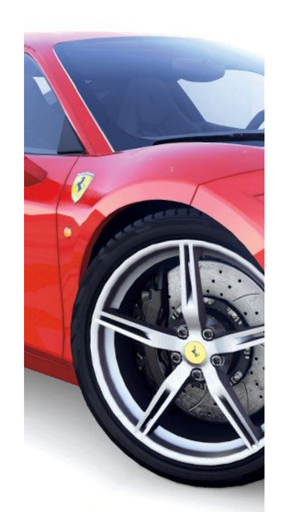
The warning that greets you upon starting Ivory Tower's open-world racing sequel seems rather unnecessary. "*The Crew 2*'s game world, vehicles and their interactions are virtual and do not simulate a real driving experience," it reads. Well, surely that goes without saying in a game where an Aston Martin Vanquish can boost off a ramp and transform into a Spitfire, which in turn can weave between Manhattan skyscrapers before dropping into the Hudson river as a powerboat. "Local traffic rules should be respected when driving vehicles in real life," it concludes. It's okay, Ubisoft; we're unlikely to replicate this any time soon.

And yet somehow the vehicular fantasy of *The Crew 2* never quite lives up to the brochure. On paper, the freedom to go anywhere and do anything across – and, on this occasion, above – a miniaturised version of the USA is much more exciting than the sobering reality. It's not as if you could ever accuse it of lacking things to do: you can slalom between gates at Miami Airport, smash buoys on New York's East River, splash around a New Orleans bayou, perform aerial aerobatics over Washington, and drag race down the Vegas Strip before riding a Harley over to Yosemite. There is, in theory, something here for everyone. The problem is that none of these somethings are put together with any real flair.

Somehow the vehicular fantasy of The Crew 2 never quite lives up to the brochure

It begins promisingly, with a kind of racing triathlon: a showpiece opener where the action segues effortlessly from road to water to air, with each leg closely fought, even as you sense it's contriving a way for you to win. You'll notice a number ticking up in the top-right of the screen, indicating the number of social-media followers your novice racer is picking up along the way. This, you'll soon discover, is the game's XP equivalent: the more fans you attract with your exploits, the more activities you'll unlock, your reputation opening doors as those numbers tick up.

In some ways it's an improvement on the previous game, offering a loose sense of structure to a game that's otherwise designed to let you do your own thing in your own time. And yet while it doesn't burden the player with a self-serious narrative, it proves more intrusive than you'd hope. It's split into four different activity types (Freestyle, Pro Racing, Offroad, Street Racing), which are further segmented into a dozen individual disciplines. Each time you unlock a new one, you'll be invited to return to one of the four HQs to obtain the vehicle you need to take part. For a game that prides itself on its seamlessness, somehow keeping an entire country accessible from the map screen, the loading times for these areas are bafflingly long. Worse are the cutscenes that introduce new events or pop up irritatingly once you've achieved a certain status. The dialogue is painfully awkward throughout: if you've ever cringed through the scripted multiplayer chat during Ubi's E3 pressers, there are moments here that will make you want to assume the foetal position.



At first, new vehicles are generously handed over for free, but once you're off the bottom rung of the fame ladder, you'll have to pay your way. For a while that's no problem: you'll likely have enough for the class you'll need, and even if it's not your first choice, the parts you'll gain from winning or placing in events will be sufficient to get you over the recommended threshold for competition. Yet the cost inevitably rises, and rarely in line with the increase of the prize purse. The need to boost both your funds and follower count encourages grinding: that the latter increases by the same amount for your third win as your first rather dampens the sense of triumph after a hard-fought victory. Indeed, there's very little at stake. A poor performance, even a humiliating last-place finish, isn't enough to dent your social-media numbers, and so a defeat doesn't sting as much as it should. Meanwhile, a secondary currency to boost your wallet is introduced: Crew Credits can be earned, yes, but they're more quickly obtained via microtransactions. Suspiciously, at our first opportunity to use them, we find ourselves narrowly short of the amount we need. The game makes a point of saying you're free to do what you want, but that's only true up to a point: there are plenty of short side activities here, from stunt runs to simple speed-record attempts. But it takes an awful lot of messing around to achieve a similar tally to beating the same race twice.

The Crew 2's street races are the main draw here, and it's clear this is where Ivory Tower is in its comfort zone. The circuits are smartly designed, incorporating devious shortcuts, natural bottlenecks and frantic traffic-dodging interludes with the opportunity to do a bit of virtual sightseeing as you whizz by famous landmarks. But even here there are problems. The rubberbanding is some of the worst we've seen. Having pushed our Aston Martin to top speed down a narrow Detroit road, we activate our nitrous to stretch our lead, only to find our closest rival has somehow gained a second and a half on us since the last checkpoint, no more than five seconds back. A single mistake is enough to see four or five AI racers hare past: it's one thing to keep the pack bunched up, quite another to have a 15-minute endurance race where the difference between first and last is a mere eight seconds. Crash and you'll frequently be reset to the track as the new backmarker, regardless of where you sat when the collision occurred. And given the idiocy of the other road users, who have a habit of pulling out from side roads directly into your path, or simply stopping in the middle of the road, that's a surprisingly common occurrence. The only reason it's not more frustrating is that your fellow racers will often patronisingly slow down if you fall behind; having negotiated a succession of corners with ▶



LEFT Events come with an advisory performance rating for entry. If you're slightly under, it seems to make a bigger difference than being significantly over – particularly during drag races, which come down to the finest of margins. BELOW Powerboat courses are typically full of long straights and easy turns, with the odd ramp doing little to spice things up. Cruising through still waters as dusk falls is a nice way to unwind, mind. MAIN Scrub back and forth through replays and you'll notice environmental changes only register the first time: having crashed through several huts, parasols and deck chairs on Miami's South Beach, we're amused to see them still destroyed when we wind back to the start



ABOVE A live photo function records the previous ten minutes of action, letting you wind back to line up the perfect snap. Or you can access a video editor that lets you add various filters or other effects in post





The endgame grind begins when you reach Icon status. Each level you gain after this earns you points that can be spent on perks for your avatar, while every ten levels you'll get a loot box containing a part for your vehicle

consummate ease, they'll timidly refuse to accelerate to top speed when the road straightens out, letting you overtake them before the finish. The third-place finish you need to pass most events is always within reach, in other words; while your performance may have deserved it, these AI contrivances mean you'll rarely feel like you really earned it.

Venture off-road and the opposite is true: Rally Raids invite you to make your own way between checkpoints, but it's not uncommon to finish half a minute ahead of your rival, even with inconsistencies over which objects you can smash through and which will bring you to a standstill. Monster-truck obstacle courses feel a bit like playing *Tony Hawk* in slow-motion with a dodgy thirdparty controller, while bike handling is almost too responsive. While the rear end of all off-road vehicles has an odd tendency to kick out after landing from a jump, it's comfortably the easiest of the four motoring families. As with the rest, you'll earn a special reward for beating the current champion, and the helicopter is just about worth it.

But while free flying is a pleasantly relaxing way to get around, the same can't be said for the airborne events. The aerobatics activities in particular are a total non-starter: here, you're asked to perform specific tricks before being given a brief period to freestyle, but the game frequently fails to recognise loops and close calls, and even struggles with the odd roll. It fares better when you take to the water: though motorboat events feel weirdly leisurely and serene, the jetsprints that ask you to guide a skittish boat around winding paths are entertainingly twitchy. Back on terra firma, drift events are baffling, with little feedback to let you know where you're going wrong, while drag races are simply boring. As long as you've got a competitive car, you merely need change gear at the right time to win.

It goes without saying that all of this is more enjoyable with others along for the ride; indeed, a more capable friend can help you pass the tougher late-game challenges. Likewise, the odd occasion where you encounter a stranger and drive around together, or take part in an impromptu race. But otherwise *The Crew 2* does almost nothing to justify its always-online demands. Most players seem to prefer going it alone, and little wonder: there's plenty to occupy them, after all, and little real incentive to, well, join a crew. According to Ubisoft, a proper PvP element is due this winter. This game will likely improve over time, though that doesn't help those who paid full price expecting a more substantial multiplayer element at launch.

Such an extension would be welcome, though *The Crew 2* is in need of wider renovation first. It is riddled with nagging inconsistencies (sometimes it'll let you pass by a checkpoint rather than through it, yet it won't always be so lax) and visual oddities (the way snow splatters across the back of your vehicle makes it look as if it has been parked beneath a flock of particularly incontinent pigeons). But its problems run much deeper: this is a game that has been spread too thinly, its world too big to traverse normally, yet made to feel small by the inclusion of fast-travel. It's epitomised by the forced firstperson view at the various hub areas, where you glide around as if hovering just off the ground. You may technically be present in this world, but you'll rarely feel truly connected to it.

5



CREW CUTS

Given that the ability to transition between vehicles is one of the game's key hooks, it's disappointing how infrequently it's required – with just a handful of multi-discipline events which automatically make the switch for you. Elsewhere, you can select a favourite land, water and air vehicle, which can be quickly accessed by clicking in the right stick and holding it in the appropriate direction (up for planes, left for boats, right for cars or bikes) for about a second. The otherwise accomplished video replay function handles this rather inelegantly, with your new ride magically appearing from thin air. In realtime, the segue is no more impressive, and you'll need to ensure you've got enough room to make a switch: you can't extricate yourself from a clump of trees by suddenly taking to the skies, for example.

Post Script

How The Crew 2 struggles to capture a country's character

The Crew 2 holds an entire (albeit significantly downsized) map of the US in memory – and it's hard not to marvel at that. Playing on a bog-standard PS4, we tap the touchpad and the camera pops out of our Dodge Charger, parked up near Griffith Observatory. We squeeze the trigger gently and the camera climbs upward, the scenery fading away as we find ourself looking at a more traditional overhead map. We slide the reticle across to New York, and a street race we're now equipped to take on. Pressing the right trigger, we zoom back down, having crossed from west coast to east within a matter of moments. It's a remarkable technical feat, and yet it's come at a cost. The ability to fast-travel like this is an acknowledgement of the enormity of the place: a recognition on Ubisoft's part that it's unmanageably large for most players.

And also, perhaps, that it's not quite busy enough. There are activities scattered across the world, but while the raw numbers might sound impressive, in reality you can find yourself driving or flying for quite a while without a single icon coming within range, particularly during the early stages before you've achieved the requisite level of fame to unlock many of them. There are photo opportunities, sure – a chance to engage in a bit of virtual tourism, to snap yourself flying past Lady Liberty, or close to the Grand Canyon. But unless you plan your journey to take in a selection of specific activities beforehand, travelling can feel slightly aimless. You'll drive or fly miles to do something that takes no more than half a minute.

For all its faults, that wasn't so much of a problem with the original game, which gradually rolled out the full splendour of its setting, making you visit an area before you had the option to fast-travel to it. Such restrictions gave it a stronger sense of place; likewise the long point-to-point events, of which – until the late-game at least – there is a noticeable lack in the sequel. It might have got plenty wrong, but *The Crew* managed to capture something of the romance of the Great American Road Trip. In unlocking the full map from the outset and spreading its asides too thinly, Ivory Tower doesn't do enough to incentivise heading out on the open road rather than skipping from one event to the next.

True, on the game's longest, quietest stretches of road, where you're closest to nature without carving it up in a monster truck or 4x4, you can enjoy the subtle shifts of scenery, from the mountains of Lake Tahoe to the swamps of Louisiana and everything in between. But outside a handful of famous locations, you never really get a strong sense of the diversity of the place. Some of these landmarks don't quite look as you'd hope, either: we've never been to Niagara Falls, but surely the real thing can't be this underwhelming.

Beyond the streets and buildings you know, the cities become boxy and nondescript



Urbanites will be particularly disappointed. One of the great things about exploring real-world locations in games is that frisson that comes with recognising somewhere you know: as any *Yakuza* player who's ever visited Kabukicho will attest, you can navigate the real place without a map. There are areas of LA and New York we recognise, just about – after returning from E3, a quick stop by the Convention Center was a must – and the Vegas Strip stands out, too, but many of these places seem almost interchangeable. Beyond the streets and buildings you know, the cities become boxy and nondescript – they're not quite indistinguishable, but if you've selected a street race from the activities menu, you'll sometimes be hard pushed to tell whether you're racing through Seattle or Chicago. As a result, they fall into the uncanny valley: they're almost but not quite right, the size of the world naturally prohibiting Ivory Tower from lavishing them with the care and attention they deserve. The closer you look, the worse it gets: businesses are algorithmically generated because the alternative would take an unworkable amount of time and manpower. And so you get stores that are "open no hours" and restaurants that serve "grilled coffee".

In these moments you can see why Ivory Tower introduced planes and boats. *The Crew 2*'s vision of the US is best appreciated from above or at a slight remove: like an Impressionist painting, the further away you get the better it looks. The view from air and sea covers a multitude of sins – New York and Vegas are gorgeous by night, and if you're cruising by on a powerboat, you can admire the views by sunrise and sunset. Still, from a distance anything can look nice during golden hour or at the crepuscular light of dawn. Whenever you've got four wheels on the tarmac, the illusion is shattered.

Perhaps Ivory Tower was always on a hiding to nothing: the challenge of giving character to a world of this size may have been insurmountable. Compare it to *Forza Horizon 3*, say, and the difference is stark: *Horizon*'s map is still vast, but the smaller scale allows Playground to fill it with local colour and detail, making it feel all the more authentic and alive. After a while playing *The Crew 2*, the artifice is all you can see. Yes, in many ways it's a remarkable achievement, but too often you're reminded why no one else has tried to cram the entirety of the United States onto a Blu-ray disc before. ■

Jurassic World: Evolution

This should be a sure thing: a marriage of the enduring park-sim formula to the most vibrant theme park in pop culture. *Jurassic World: Evolution* promises to let you create your own dinosaur enterprise spanning several Costa Rican islands, a process that sees you laying out enclosures, entertaining guests and dealing with inevitable disaster as sabotage and tropical storms set your star attractions free.

It delivers a strong first impression, too. Frontier's dinosaurs are detailed, characterful and well-animated, and there is something immediately appealing about these lush islands and the clean, high-tech buildings with which you populate them. Each new dinosaur is introduced with a cinematic camera pan and a movie-accurate roar, and cultivating enclosures that meet each creature's needs, from topography and foliage to food and optimal social groups, presents an absorbing challenge at first. There are a few early hiccups – lengthy waits while you earn enough cash for your next key building, or the repetitive chore of sending crews out on fossil hunts – but the fantasy holds, and there's satisfaction in laying out your first park just so. Unfortunately, *Evolution*'s flaws begin to emerge as soon as wonder gives way to serious engagement with the game's underlying management systems.

In addition to building a functional and profitable park within the narrow confines of each island, you must also complete contracts on behalf of your entertainment, science and security divisions. Building your reputation with each leads to specific rewards, while neglecting them might result in saboteurs cutting the power at a key moment. There are critical-path missions, too, which impose success conditions that curtail your creative freedom and are frequently tedious – the first warning signs of the game's downturn.

The issue with the contract system is that there's no real logic underpinning its demands or consequences. The science division might ask you to go ten minutes without a dinosaur attack, for example, but successfully completing this challenge effectively tanks your reputation with the security team. Security might then ask you to build a hotel, only for this to result in the entertainment division – whose principle concern is for the park's tourists – rising up in revolt and poisoning your triceratops. These strange emerging situations can be entertaining, but their bizarre logic takes you out of the fantasy of running a park.

This extends to the minutiae of the game, too. The fantasy of organising a dinosaur park is quickly subsumed by the chore of running a business whose every operation requires your direct input – from refilling feeders to rebooting gates to incrementing the cost of a burger for maximum profit. Satisfaction in simulations comes from setting up functioning processes: *Evolution* matures into something like a clicker game, where a lack of automation forces you into busywork in order to distract from a lack of depth.

Evolution's superficially rich systems undermine one another. It's possible to invest in more secure fences for your dinosaur enclosures, for example, but this doesn't really matter because a deinonychus can and will headbutt its way through the thickest walls if its food or social needs aren't met. Park management should be about trade-offs and compromise, but *Evolution*'s thin simulation effectively reduces a broad spectrum of options down to a handful of absolute necessities.

There's also a profound disconnect between the degree of depth granted to your park's dinosaur occupants and its human visitors. Dinosaurs exhibit a relatively small set of behaviours, but they have individual needs and face individual dangers. Individual guests, however, don't express any personal preferences, and don't even really seem to react to the dinosaurs, except in the canned animations that play when they get eaten. This is a step backwards for the management genre, which has been successfully simulating individual theme park visitors for decades.

It can lead to some truly bizarre situations, too. On more than one occasion we encounter scenarios where park visitors flee into dinosaur enclosures and refuse to leave, even with the gates left open. This results in a persistent 'dinosaur threat' alert even with the rest of the park secured, and the only way to resolve it is to wait for the guests to get eaten: the cost of the ensuing lawsuits isn't prohibitive, and our safety rating reliably returns to green as soon as the threat is 'resolved'.

Dispatching ranger teams to repair a wall or reboot a power station in the midst of a dinosaur crisis is a big part of that fantasy, and *Evolution*'s implementation is initially promising: you can set task lists for your rangers and issue upgrades, and even take control and drive around your park yourself. The fun fades, however, when you discover that ranger teams are effectively invulnerable: a T-rex might chase after a jeep in the manner of the first movie, but it's programmed to never actually catch it. At this point, cautious micromanagement gives way to outright manipulation of *Evolution*'s undercooked fundamentals. That, unfortunately, is the story of the game as a whole.

It is testament to the high standard of presentation that *Evolution* survives these issues for as long as it does. Collecting and building enclosures for dinosaurs remains fun simply because they look and sound great, but this is the shallow kind of fun that borders on compulsion, and a far cry from the game's potential. *Evolution*'s successes entertain your mind's-eye view of what running a dinosaur theme park might be like, but its failures encourage you to imagine the better game that could be made with this premise.

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Developer/publisher Frontier Developments
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Cultivating enclosures that meet each creature's needs presents an absorbing challenge at first



SPARED NO EXPENSE
Evolution has a lightweight narrative, told as you progress from one island to another. Story beats and commentary are delivered as voiceover, with the game featuring several actors from the movies – BD Wong, Bryce Dallas Howard and Jeff Goldblum. There's a sense of sterility to this aspect of the game, however, which stems from the disconnect between the loftier considerations of dinosaur management being discussed and the thin simulation that you engage with. Coupled with the game's fussy fixation with movie-themed unlockables, this creates the sense that you're on a Jurassic Park-themed rollercoaster of your own – unwilling to deviate from the franchise's playbook. In this regard at least, *Evolution* mirrors the most recent films.





ABOVE The game's range of dinosaurs are detailed and well-animated, and watching them hunt is generally pretty satisfying. Ultimately, however, these are canned interactions – there's no hunting in packs, for example





TOP Visitor AI is thin, to say the least. This throng of people responded to a stegosaurus' escape by fleeing into the stegosaurus enclosure, which would make a strange sort of sense if the enclosure wasn't also full of stegosauruses.
MAIN Unlocking and deploying new dinosaurs from creation labs is *Evolution*'s chief source of appeal. There are plenty of them, too – enough to give you choice over what you include in your park.
RIGHT Visitor needs are highly localised, despite the small size of each island. Your guests don't want to walk more than a few yards to shop, eat or play arcade games



Catastrophe management in *Evolution* is a rote and fussy affair when it should be the heart of any Jurassic Park game

Post Script

Patented and packaged: the issue with the Jurassic Park licence

Jurassic World: Evolution isn't the first management game to launch with issues like these. Thin mechanics that orbit a strong theme are one of the genre's most frequent stumbling blocks, and often the measure of success for this kind of game is not how it performs at launch, but how it performs a few expansions down the road. Indeed, Frontier's own *Planet Coaster* launched with some of these same issues and grew into itself over time with the help of both its development team and its community.

Evolution's future is uncertain, however. For its flaws, *Planet Coaster* had a strong central hook – powerful customisation tools that, regardless of the game's successes or failures as a park sim, gave players something substantial to engage with. *Evolution* is remarkably light on customisation, with only a single biome and no way to customise your park's buildings. You can apply different preset skins to your jeeps and helicopters, but otherwise your Jurassic World must look like the one from the most recent movies. You can unlock skins for dinosaurs, too, but these run the range from mottled green to mottled brown to mottled grey, leaving nothing to inspire players to spend more time playing.

Player-made mods are out of the question too, at least for the time being, and that raises a question. Is the Jurassic Park licence really a good fit for this kind of game? That is the trade-off that has been made here: where *Planet Coaster* offers player freedom, *Evolution* substitutes movie authenticity. As a result it looks and sounds great and makes a strong first impression (John Williams' score on the main menu screen, for instance, undoubtedly elevates the experience), but the effect ultimately wears off. Once you've seen a T-rex roar and stomp and gobble somebody up once you've seen it a dozen times, and without a deep simulation or meaningful customisation to reinforce the experience, interest quickly wanes.

Evolution's flaws also prevent it from confronting a different question: what does a successful Jurassic Park simulation actually look like? None of the films are about a dinosaur theme park that operates successfully: they are stories of hubris, horror and mismanagement. There's appeal to a game that lets players avoid the same mistakes or stumble into them unwillingly, but *Evolution*'s mechanics aren't sophisticated enough for this. Crises rarely occur due to unexpected, evolving circumstances. More often than not a breakout is the consequence of a dice roll behind the scenes, or the scripted conditions of a particular mission.

On the other hand, there's appeal in a game that simulates not so much the running of Jurassic Park but the crisis management that kicks in when it all goes wrong – but *Evolution* isn't this game either. Here, a dinosaur breakout is always solved in the same four steps: open emergency shelters, order rangers to reboot and repair gates and walls, order the containment unit to tranquilise rampaging dinosaurs and order the transport team to move them back into their paddocks. The situation can never be more complicated than that: dinosaurs will never attack ranger teams, or get inside buildings, or break crucial infrastructure.

If you've ever watched Jurassic Park and wondered why they didn't simply have somebody with a tranquiliser rifle fly around and deal with the dinosaurs from a helicopter, *Evolution* has the answer: it's really boring. The most recent movies are plotted to solve this problem, rushing to ensure that there's always a rogue Pteranodon ready to impale the pilot or a dinosaur tail swinging just in time to open the closing elevator doors. Where these moments make the films feel weightless and absurd, they'd be fantastic in a game whose simulation was sophisticated enough to allow them to occur organically. *Evolution*, at launch at least, is not that game. ■

Vampyr

Developer Dontnod Entertainment
Publisher Focus Home Interactive
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

A gothic adventure set in London during the flu pandemic of 1918, *Vampyr* is Dontnod's first game since the well-received teen time travel drama *Life Is Strange*. Where its predecessor broke new thematic ground – at least for this medium – *Vampyr* is a much more familiar style of game. As gentlemanly surgeon-turned-vampire Jonathan Reid, you unpick the mystery of your transformation as you explore a nocturnal world heavily derivative of modern vampire fiction – particularly White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade. That this is also a combat-heavy RPG speaks to Dontnod's desire to expand on its previous work. *Vampyr* channels *Bloodborne* in places, *Life Is Strange* in others – and its failure to reconcile these competing drives is what ultimately lets it down.

Reid's journey comprises a highly linear critical path, dotted with fetch-and-kill sidequests. These sequences are rather short, and *Vampyr*'s open world is very confined. Instead, your time is chiefly invested in the game's social areas. These are districts patrolled by vividly-rendered civilians, each with their own narrative threads – and who can be slain, if you wish, in return for blood and experience points.

There's a distinctive sombre intensity to *Vampyr*'s storytelling: its world is one of creeping, buttoned-up misery and violence devoid of passion. The dozen or so principal characters who make up the civilian populace of each of London's districts have their own desires, regrets, vices and ailments, and these weave together into a broad but effectively grim picture of society. Speaking to each person and exploring the places where they live and work reveals secrets and connections, and leveraging these – in conjunction with your vampiric 'mesmerise' power – allows you to dig deeper into *Vampyr*'s supporting fiction.

The issue, however, is that this feels mandatory – exhausting every part of every conversation tree is necessary if you wish to locate every clue and sidequest. This strikes a blow to player agency and, in turn, turns exploration into a kind of chore. Conversations can be long and, as mentioned, are uniformly bleak: what should be atmospheric becomes simply dreary as roleplaying turns into drudgery.

There is also a vertiginous gulf between the feel of *Vampyr*'s social areas and its combat zones. Leave one of London's enclaves of civilisation and you immediately find yourself in streets patrolled by respawning mobs of vampire hunters and slavering packs of feral vampires. Dr Reid's weary determination to do no harm evaporates as he eviscerates packs of foes with a surgical saw; the fact that there are a dozen vampire hunters for every other member of society utterly undermines the sense that you are entering any sort of secret world.

The *Souls*-derived combat system has its qualities. In addition to managing your stamina and health, you must sustain a blood pool that allows access to important special abilities. You do this by stunning foes with a secondary weapon to allow you to feed, which in turn renders you temporarily invulnerable. It isn't sufficiently polished to threaten any of FromSoftware's games, but there's a sense of rhythm and power here that can be gratifying to dig into. The issue is that it is so strikingly at odds with the rest of the game: where social areas ask you to wring your hands about the matter of feeding on the living, in combat you will consume two or three enemies per fight. Where story-Jonathan frets over the violence done to his soul by a tragedy in the game's opening minutes, battle-Jonathan holds down both triggers to channel his Ultimate and cause a vampire hunter's blood to explode.

Vampyr's ambitious attempt to unify its two halves hinges on a balancing act that seems doomed to failure. The game lacks any sort of difficulty setting, and enemies in combat zones quickly escalate to a level that you will struggle to match without levelling up yourself. While quests and kills grant small amounts of XP, major boosts can be earned by feeding on civilians – with more granted when you slay somebody whose backstory you have thoroughly explored. Slaying innocents, in turn, can result in knock-on story consequences that are detailed in text when you rest and advance time to the next night.

The problem with this system is that it requires a very specific attitude on the part of the player. To a completionist seeking the best ending or somebody primarily interested in narrative, each non-player character represents a well of unexplored content, and being asked to trade this for a slightly easier time in combat is a tough sell. It's easier to simply persevere through difficult encounters, relying on a drip-feed of experience from other sources. There is just about enough available to do so, which turns the entire civilian-slaying mechanic – and all of its attendant themes – into an unnecessary-feeling bolt-on when it should be the heart of the game. Even if you decide to go on a killing spree for roleplaying's sake, Reid's story remains one of moral uncertainty, hinging on a handful of critical-path kill-or-spare moments that you'd have encountered anyway.

Vampyr is a set of ideas that cohere on paper but not in practice, coupled with a dreary setting that becomes less atmospheric the longer you spend with it. A bigger budget and more time may have helped with the latter issue, but the former is a matter of conception rather than execution. *Life Is Strange* was a success because it applied a tested adventure-game formula to a set of under-represented characters and themes: *Vampyr* attempts an ambitious reworking of something far more familiar, and in doing so reveals that Dontnod's strength lies with storytelling, not systems.

5

What should be atmospheric becomes simply dreary as roleplaying turns into drudgery



A BLOODY HISTORY
Vampyr's commitment to its setting is – on the whole – laudable, and one of the game's better qualities. Reid, and many of the characters he meets, are in the process of dealing with the trauma of the First World War. The disproportionate impact of the flu on the poor of London is explored, as are contemporary attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and mental health. Positioning you as a doctor in this environment is an intelligent bit of narrative design, giving you a reason to explore the city hearing the tales of the needy. The writing is guilty of frequent anachronisms, however, and strange tonal shifts weaken the sense of place. This is compounded by the description of some London districts as faubourgs, a French term – a bug, one hopes.



RIGHT Feeding in combat is essential for success, with several special abilities and upgrades making it easier to do so.
MAIN *Vampyr*'s storytelling takes place over the course of lengthy conversations, but it can feel like you have very little control over Jonathan's attitudes and interests.
BOTTOM Nocturnal London is universally grey and brown, with a lack of environmental variety dragging *Vampyr* down







ABOVE Investigation of crime scenes is a promising but ultimately underdeveloped mechanic, and it frequently becomes a case of simply clicking through all available options until a new clue appears

Unravel Two

The first *Unravel* was that rarest of things in games: an honest-to-goodness surprise. Introduced by its endearingly nervous creative lead Martin Sahlin during EA's 2015 E3 presser, this gentle, sweet little indie game inexplicably found itself rubbing shoulders with a host of noisy mega-budget blockbusters. As such, this delightful anomaly was all everyone wanted to talk about afterwards. It was the kind of passion project that seemed like a one-and-done, telling a small, self-contained story with a definite ending. *Unravel Two*, then, is also a surprise – albeit more for the fact that it exists at all than its sudden release, three years on from the original's unveiling. Predictably, it doesn't quite feel so much a labour of love, yet it's much more than the contractual obligation it could so easily have been.

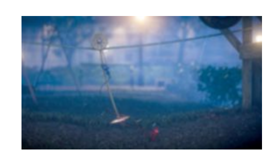
It begins with the revelation that, like Yoshi, Yarny is a species, not an individual. Washed ashore by a raging storm, a red Yarny soon finds another of his kind; with a spark of light, their two loose threads fuse together, leaving the pair permanently tethered. A lone player can control both characters, switching between the two to negotiate the obstacles before them, though it's clearly been primarily designed as a local co-op experience.

This shift allows Coldwood to exploit Yarny's existing abilities in fresh ways, rather than awkwardly foisting new ones upon him. You'll still use your thread to pull yourself up to higher ground; to swing over gaps, to form makeshift trampolines, ramps and bridges. And thread management is still a factor, although here you're limited by how far the two characters can stray from one another without their bond becoming taut. But *Unravel Two* is at its best when it forces the two apart. There's a deceptive simplicity to many of these puzzles, with seemingly rudimentary switch-and-lever puzzles transformed into devious challenges: guiding one Yarny to the right place is usually straightforward enough, but getting them both there frequently isn't.

At times – and this is absolutely intended as a compliment – it feels like an extended hiking expedition. One Yarny will act as a grapple point for the other, clutching one end of the rope as their partner lowers themselves slowly through a fiery labyrinth, or swings to safety. Played as a pair, you'll feel like a climbing instructor and their pupil, or perhaps even stuntmen in an action movie: one exhilarating set-piece feels like an extended trapeze act, with the anchor becoming the swinger and vice versa. Most of these work equally well with lone players switching roles throughout. Only on rare occasions (usually when hazards enforce stricter timing) do you feel disadvantaged without an extra pair of hands. In fact, sometimes it's more demanding with two, since you'll need to coordinate your movements. It is – and we speak from experience here – alarmingly easy for one player to briefly lose concentration and let go of their end of the thread at a vital moment. *Unravel Two* is undoubtedly more stressful as a co-op game, but it's a good deal funnier, too.

Developer Coldwood Interactive
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Unravel Two is much more than the contractual obligation it could so easily have been



RUNNING STITCH
Unravel Two might seem an unlikely game to speedrun – particularly since its controls, though improved over the original, don't always seem built for precision – but it has gold, silver and bronze medal times to beat, and there's even a prize for a successful no-death run for all chapters bar the first. The ability to move the two Yarnys individually without having to reunite them to save time means a pair of skilled players will surely have the edge over one here. Those seeking further challenges can find them within a selection of bonus stages which present more elaborate puzzles at three tiers of steadily increasing difficulty. Your goal in each of these is to rescue a trapped Yarny; doing so unlocks new customisation options for the central pair.

Elsewhere, Coldwood confidently folds platforming and puzzling into a clutch of standout sequences. One, where you must avoid the attentions of a persistent capercaillie, involves another technique: misdirection. You'll navigate a stream patrolled by an angry pike, carefully timing your leaps between leaf platforms as it darts and leaps from the water. And there's a terrific centrepiece involving a burning barn, with fragile platforms, rolling logs and tense puzzles that must be completed before the encroaching flames reach you.

The challenge doesn't always come from the puzzles themselves. On rare occasions, the game's physics will confound you: we passed one challenge involving a falling branch at the fifth attempt, without having changed our approach. Another proved a struggle to solve until we discovered we could squeeze one Yarny through a tiny gap. The game's three-tier hint system – the third spelling out the solution to your current conundrum in its entirety – is perhaps a little too easily called upon, though at least you're not left unsure whether you have the wrong solution, or that you're on the right track but something hasn't quite worked right.

The game's platforming is occasionally a little loose, too. Exiting a swing demands you let go a split-second earlier than feels natural to do so, though you do have some control over your trajectory; indeed, there seems to be a small degree of automation that makes landing from swings a little easier. If it feels a little inexact, that's partly down to a general lack of feedback when it comes to running and jumping – these woollen heroes are supposed to be flimsy, but we're not sure they should feel quite this weightless.

And while the Yarnys' bond is unbreakable, their connection with the story is tenuous. Narrative is literally backgrounded: the action will sporadically pause as you watch projected images of a pair of young boys absconding and getting up to mischief. If some scenarios seem a little opaque, their themes are made transparent by a series of paintings in the game's lighthouse hub. Though you're occasionally prompted to jolt events into progressing, standing within two sparks of light as if connecting an invisible circuit, it's hard to associate your journey with theirs.

The sense that this is, in many respects, a better game but also a less cohesive one is underlined by its final chapter. Here, you're given a new ability for no apparent reason, introduced clumsily by tutorial text. Yet for all its incongruousness, it prompts a set-piece so joyous and liberating that it's hard to mind: one last surprise in a sequel with the invention to compensate for its lack of emotional wallop.

7

ABOVE Mindful that many players didn't see the end of the original's story, Coldwood has included a slow-motion option to make more taxing platforming challenges easier – but you're unable to set times or record no-death runs. **RIGHT** The spark the two Yarnys follow feels redundant, since the way forward is usually obvious. Keep an eye on its path and you'll spoil a few puzzles for yourself



BELOW You can hold a button to unite the two. One will give the other a piggyback for a few seconds but soon after their threads will merge, forming a single two-tone character





ABOVE It looks glorious, the shallow focus highlighting foreground detail while the hazy backdrops suggest a wider world we'll never fully explore. Once again, the outdoor locations outshine the grimy indoor settings

Splatoon 2: Octo Expansion

Play any game for a year and chances are you're going to get pretty good at it. It's a fact that hasn't been lost on Nintendo while designing this substantial singleplayer add-on. Even so, the difference between Octo Expansion and Octo Canyon, the base game's story mode, is stark. If the latter was about teaching you how to play *Splatoon*, these 80 stages have been made with an understanding that it no longer needs to show you the ropes. Now Nintendo can test what you've learned over the past 12 months. Now it can really bare its teeth.

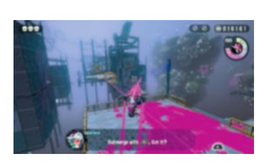
In other words, the quick of temper and slow of thumb need not apply. But then a lightweight challenge wouldn't suit the story Octo Expansion is trying to tell. It centres on a lone Octoling trapped inside a dingy underground station alongside the campaign's doddering mentor, Captain Cuttlefish. A so-called 'promised land' awaits, but only if they first complete a series of test chambers. There's no GlaDOS-type host, but the debt to *Portal* is clear. Yet if anything, this is storytelling of an even darker hue. The dim lighting and echoing emptiness of the central station makes it a hub you won't want to visit too often; the train's occupants, meanwhile, are based on the ugliest, most frightening deep-sea creatures. There is a constant sense of danger and menace. It is, quite deliberately, a world apart from the bright lights and bold colours of Inkopolis Square.

These challenges are spread across interlocking subway lines, with new routes opening up as you complete the tests that lie at the junctions between them. Each chamber has an entry fee commensurate with its difficulty, though the least expensive tests don't exactly go easy on you. Some give you multiple lives; with others, you've got a single shot at success, while many are set against a ticking clock. Fail, and a pack on your back will quickly fill with ink before bursting: a brutally swift, messy end. The longer chambers are unfailingly tense, such that you'll be glad to return to the train afterwards for a breather. But you'll be glad the majority of them are short, since you'll likely be replaying those ones a few times before you pass.

The equipment you're given will be familiar to regular visitors to Inkopolis. But if Octo Canyon felt like a chance to briefly try them out beyond the multiplayer arenas, this explores what they can *really* do. The Inkjet special weapon gets a clutch of chambers to itself – with several designed to remind you that it can only stay airborne for a few brief moments if it's not over solid ground – and others offering distant targets to satisfyingly splatter. The Baller's explosive capabilities are tested against a boss that demands you get close to cover him in ink, but whose attacks can sweep you off the sides of the stage. Indeed, the one common feature here is a distinct lack of solid ground: the best Baller courses feel like a cross between *Super Mario Sunshine*'s bonus levels and *Super Monkey Ball*, as you ride over boost pads, swerve enemy fire, and hop between slanted platforms that dangle precariously over an endless void.

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

It's white-knuckle stuff throughout, so consistently intense it's almost physically draining over longer sessions



SQUIDS UNDERGROUND
Truthfully, we were expecting little more than a rudimentary narrative wrapper to cover the 80 challenges, but Octo Expansion widens the *Splatoon* lore in a much more satisfying way than Octo Canyon. This is more than just a straightforward triumph-of-the-cephalopod-spirit tale, but an exploration of how a long-established cultural barrier finally appears to be coming down; it's heartwarming to witness the newcomers to Inkopolis Square being so enthusiastically welcomed by the *Splatoon* community. There's some wonderful incidental detail, too, especially in the unlockable chat logs between Pearl, Marina and Cuttlefish. The conversations touchingly explore how fond and supportive of one another they really are.

Other chambers are about getting you accustomed to less-favoured weapons, or at least using them in unusual circumstances – like spinning a roulette of enemies and sniping them as they circle back into view and range. Often you're given a selection of tools, with the reward rising or falling according to how well-suited they are to the job. Reaching the goal without getting a drop of enemy ink on you might be straightforward enough with a Brella that acts as a shield from incoming fire, but negotiating the narrow strips left by a Squiffer's squirts represents a very different, much steeper challenge. And when you're atop a platform of crates that disintegrates beneath your feet with every slosh of paint, the giant Flingza Roller is as much a threat to your own safety as that of your hovering targets.

It's thrifty in the best way, bending existing ideas into weird new shapes, with the course designs thriving on the restrictions they impose. Some limit your ink supply, forcing you to make every shot count. Others remove your weapon entirely, inviting you to face a wall of enemies firing gobs of ink that you must dodge for 30 long seconds. For anything new, you're given a level (or sometimes just a single checkpoint) to get used to it, before Nintendo steps things up. Giant eight-balls have to be nudged along narrow platforms; at first, it's kind enough to put railings on either side, but they're soon removed. Sentient stacks of blocks must be alerted by a bomb thrown in front of their faces; once they drop, you've got mere seconds to swim up and across them before they flip upright and throw you off into the abyss. It's white-knuckle stuff throughout, so consistently intense it's almost physically draining over longer sessions. On the rare occasions you can pause to take in the scenery, you'll notice the skyboxes are filled with floating relics from the past, including classic Nintendo hardware. It feels fitting for a game whose challenge harks back to the company's arcade beginnings; you are, after all, feeding credits into a machine.

Or sometimes being ground up by it. It can, on occasion, be punishing in ways that feel slightly cheap – though that's only really true if you visit all 80 chambers. The route to the end of the story is much shorter, and can be accelerated by the ability to skip challenges once you've failed them a few times. However you get there, the closing stretch is magnificent, with a wonderfully diverse gauntlet of challenges followed by a final encounter that reinvigorates a multiplayer mode so brilliantly that it's clear the development team has enough ideas in reserve to support another expansion or a third numbered entry. Either way, this is surely Nintendo's finest piece of DLC to date – an encore that may leave a few in frustrated tears, but will have seasoned splatters crying out for more.

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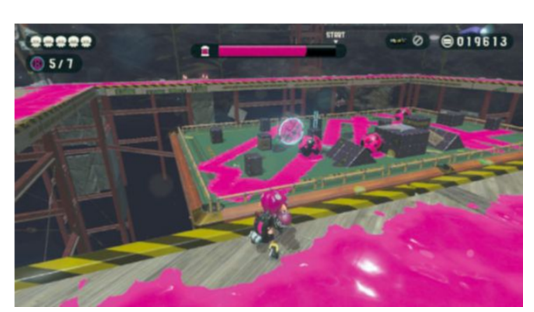
ABOVE The final checkpoint is a chance to steel yourself for a course's toughest sequence: for example, taking down an entire tower of enemies, using a charger to zip between grapple points to find the best angles of attack.



LEFT A few stages are brief enough to capture in their entirety on Nintendo's 30-second video service – such as this cathartic challenge, which gives you half a minute to destroy crates with an Octobrush



BELOW In such a fashion-centric world, the gear you'll obtain from beating all chambers gives you bragging rights, while doubling as stealth marketing for the expansion. We're not sure the bonus boss fight's reward is worth the considerable effort, mind you



ABOVE Only Nintendo could conceive of transforming a sniper rifle of sorts into a surrogate pool cue. You'll need to pocket every eight-ball here with just a limited supply of ink at your disposal

Youropa

There's a line that's often trotted out whenever a game is set in a real-world location. Here, we're told by developers or PR flacks, is a famous city "as you've never seen it before". Well, on this occasion, it couldn't be more true: this is Paris, but certainly not as we know it. It's as if aliens decided to beam up the Eiffel Tower and its immediate surroundings but gave up on the idea halfway through, leaving huge chunks of metal and masonry floating impossibly in the sky. In fact, *Youropa*'s makers did much the same over a decade of on/off development, abandoning the game after a disastrous Kickstarter campaign before belatedly returning to complete the job. If it occasionally carries the baggage of ten years' worth of ideas, it's far less fragmented than you'd think – and at times its individual pieces cohere in quietly dazzling fashion.

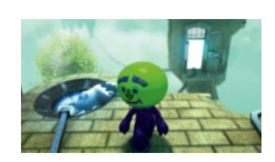
If your initial steps are tentative, that's only partly down to the slightly heavy-footed movement of the bulbous-headed protagonist. This is an unusual place to negotiate, and for a while at least you're not even able to jump. Yet you'll soon discover you can walk up walls, or even follow an arcing path around to a platform's underside, the rest of the city yawning above and below you all at once. As such, your object is to scout your current area for any curved surfaces, divining the route to an area's exit door – which sometimes require a bit of extra effort to unlock first. You'll follow the path of a snaking wire to an electronic switch or a tangle of cables to a pressure plate. But where to find something with which to weigh it down? This is fairly rudimentary puzzle-platformer fare in essence, but the complexity of the world means the solutions are anything but straightforward.

Youropa does offer some guidance to help you orientate yourself in those early stages. You'll see statuesque figures, frozen mid-stride, giving you an obvious visual indicator of where to go next. If graffiti tags sometimes spell out your next move a little too clearly, they're still welcome when getting to the right place is more than half the battle. You can zoom out for an overview of your current environs, examining a stage from all angles to figure out where you are and where to head next – or you might find a clue to a puzzle on a surface you otherwise can't see. Bring up the map screen, meanwhile, and you'll see a blinking marker off in the distance, giving you an idea of your approximate destination without any hint of how to get there. It rarely feels like you're being led by the nose: the route through a single room is often circuitous, never mind the later puzzles that require multiple detours. Instead, it's just enough to give your journey a sense of purpose.

Routes dart outward from what remains of the tower, each leading to a temple where you'll gain a new ability. Here, you'll need to power a central energy source, and while at first it's a relatively simple matter of locating four switches in a single area, you'll soon find puzzles that span multiple rooms. The powers themselves are actually rather mundane – the fourth you'll earn is a jump, while the fifth gives you the ability to run – but in a world like this they prove hugely transformative. Since you've spent so long with your feet glued to the ground, the jump feels wonderfully freeing – at least until you realise it makes exploration vastly more dangerous, since any time you're not attached to solid ground leaves you at the mercy of gravity's pull. The temptation to hop up to a nearby platform will lead to several unwanted falls, and in truth *Youropa* doesn't always give you enough visual reminders that you're the wrong way up. Bringing up the wider external view is hardly an ideal solution, though you'll soon acclimatise to looking more carefully before you leap.

Developer/publisher Frecle
Format PC
Release Out now

It's hard to understate the feeling of triumph you'll get from returning to one of Youropa's temples



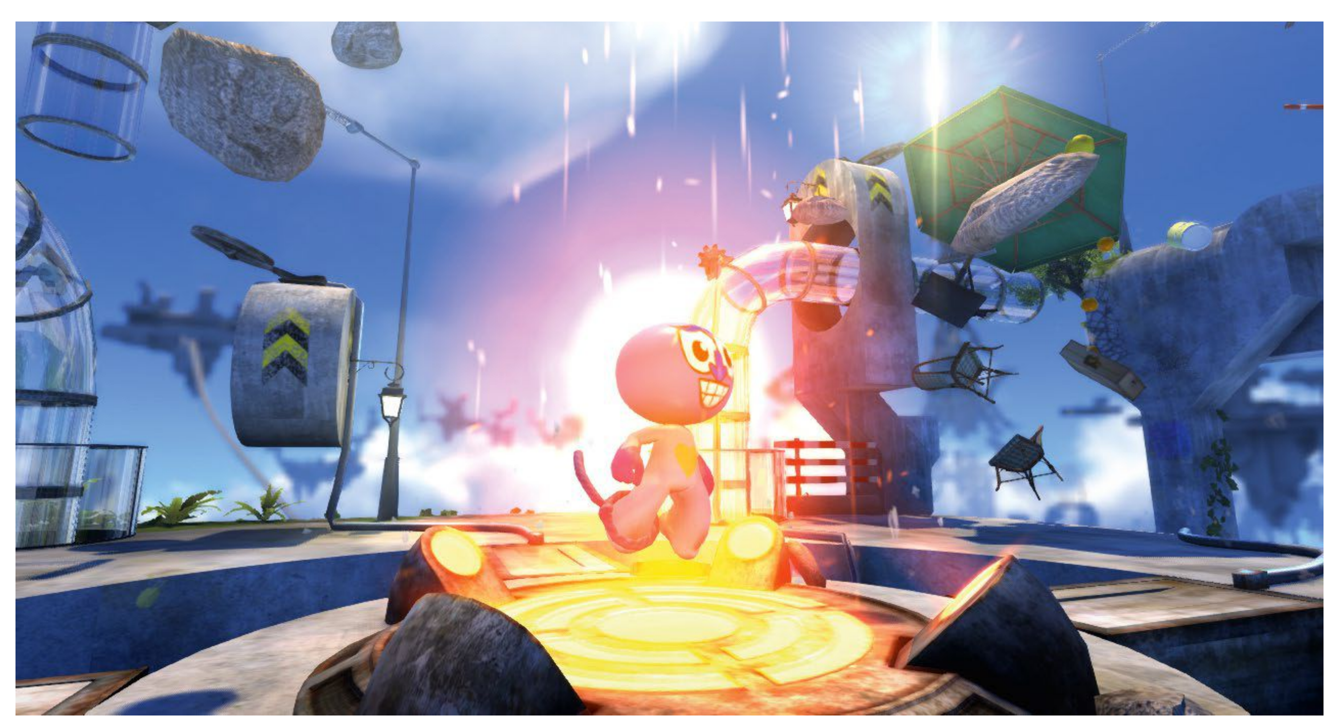
TRUE COLOURS
The 'you' in *Youropa* speaks to the variety of ways in which the player can personalise their game. Your avatar begins as a blank canvas, but you're soon given the opportunity to make them your own, care of a surprisingly flexible painting tool. You're not stuck with what you choose at the outset, either: you'll find paint kits dotted throughout the game, and you can fast-travel between them should you fancy trying out a new look. There's also a comprehensive level builder, which extends to letting you connect multiple rooms and determining enemy patrol routes. It's a daunting prospect, mind: the interface is limited and you're given zero guidance. Still, our own efforts gave us fresh appreciation for the work of *Youropa*'s level designers.

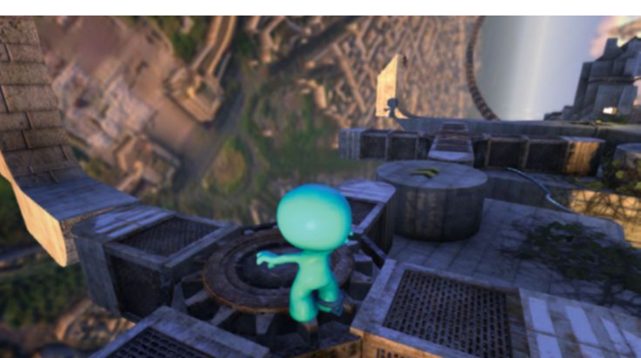
It keeps you on your toes in other ways, too. You'll fling open a door only to find yourself hurtling down and around oil-slicked ramps and half-pipes, swerving sparking electrical hazards. Some rooms feature a bit of light stealth as you dodge patrolling brutes; later, you'll lure one into a deadly jet of water, before dragging its prone body into position beneath a platform, and using it as a trampoline. You'll spray-paint boxes that explode to reveal a pogo stick, a scooter, a car – passing through electrical gates to power yet another circuit. And you'll distract groups of razor-toothed critters that yap like dogs but look like tiny sharks; you may need to give them a sharp kick to escape their bite, but they absolutely deserve it.

Though the variety is welcome, some of these sequences exacerbate *Youropa*'s biggest flaws. Vehicle controls are skittish and clumsy, while the inertia of your protagonist during those oily slides never feels quite right – a fast, frictionless glide suddenly becoming a slow, slippery shuffle. The physics can be a maddening issue in some puzzles: until you work out the precise position to stand in order to drop a cardboard box onto a target below you'll have to retrieve said box from the bottom of the building you've just scaled every time you fail. The platforming, too, can be a little wonky: suggesting it's like guiding one of the combatants from *Gang Beasts* through a *Mario* level would be harsh, but not a million miles away.

Still, the moments where this micro-studio's inexperience shows are few, and forgivable. It's hard to understate the feeling of triumph you'll get from returning to one of *Youropa*'s temples, the glow of blazing light greeting you to confirm you've mastered the intricacies of this fascinating floating world – or at least one corner of it. It may drive you potty at times, but this really is Paris as you've never seen it before, and you won't forget it in a hurry.

7







ABOVE Spraying these large crates on all sides releases their contents, and it sometimes pays to keep hold of the paints – scattered across the world you'll find empty graffiti templates to fill in

MAIN Your avatar will lose colour each time they fall or take a hit. When the paint drains all the way to their feet it's game over, and you'll restart from the current room's entrance.
ABOVE At times *Youropa* left us feeling mildly queasy – though it may be down to the unsettlingly vertiginous views that some routes can throw up.
RIGHT Glowing pink cassettes are the game's main collectible. It seems like you can grab them all on your first visit to an area, but some are easier to reach when you've got a full set of abilities



Mario Tennis Aces

Think of *Mario Tennis Aces* as an apology for Wii U's shamefully scrawny *Ultra Smash*, and you'll start to understand the mentality behind its chaotic court action. Renouncing the purity and balance of the N64 game, each new entry has brought its own gimmick to the party. *Aces* has several: there are Zone Shots and Trick Shots, Zone Speed and Special Shots, blocks and broken rackets. It can feel like a one-on-one fighter as much as a sports game, with careful meter management being as vital as precise shot placement.

Clearly keen to address complaints about the slender singleplayer element of previous games, Camelot thrusts you immediately into Adventure mode. Telling an endearingly ridiculous story of a legendary racket that possesses the holder, it begins as an extended tutorial, steadily acclimatising you to the various shot types and special techniques over a series of novelty exercises and boss battles. You'll learn that charging shots builds your energy gauge, which lets you pull off powerful strokes by standing within star-shaped markers, the view shifting to a firstperson perspective as you're given a couple of seconds to fine-tune your aim. You won't always want to aim for the lines, since a shot straight at your opponent can damage their racket instead, leading to an automatic KO if they've not got any spares left; unless, that is, they pull off a perfect parry, which gives their own meter a boost.

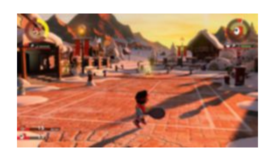
From Piranha Plants to haunted mirrors, each court has its own environmental twists to deal with, though some of these are profoundly annoying. One encounter aboard a rainswept galleon deck is miserable, and the court's gimmick can't even be turned off in Free Play mode. The later stages don't so much prepare you for Tournament Mode as leave you in a position to beat two of the three cups with your eyes closed. The third is trickier, but only relatively: we lost all of five points in a three-set final. Character balance is an issue, too, with a handful dominating the online meta – and when you pick them yourself you'll understand why.

There are too many caveats, too many pieces that have to fall into place to experience *Aces* at its very best. And yet a game between two evenly-matched characters and similarly-skilled human players is an unfettered joy. Collectively, the gimmicks lend a thrilling dynamism and tension to rallies, as you weigh up the risk of blocking a potential racket-breaker against the reward of earning the chance to hit back with one of your own. The extra investment in character detail pays off, too. As Waluigi moonwalks across the court to hit a perfect backspin trick-shot winner, you'll be ready to forgive most of *Aces'* faults, if not its Bloopers.

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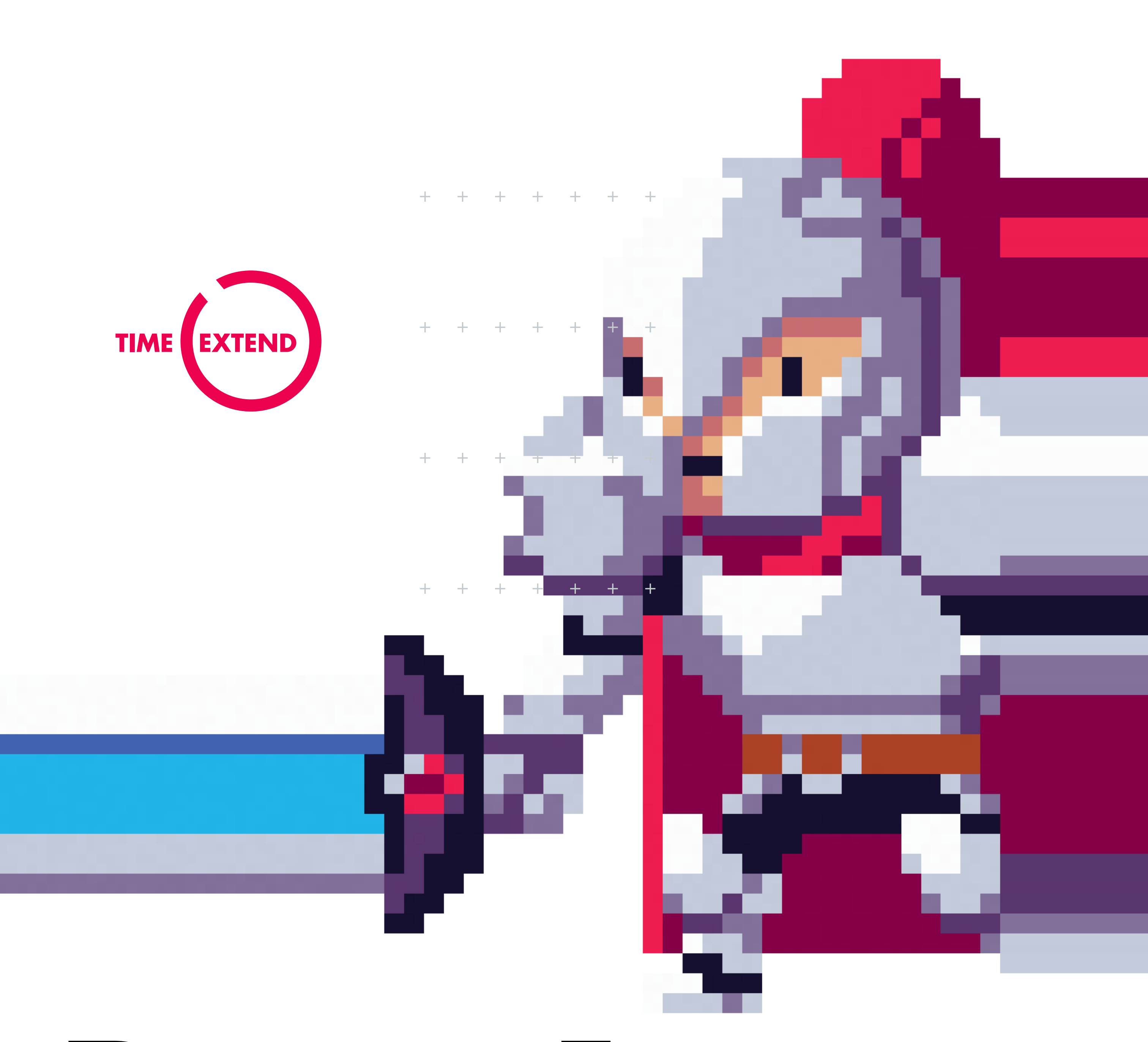
Specials can be countered, but it's risky: mistime a block and you'll lose a racket. Using Zone Speed slows the pace of the ball, but that arguably makes the block timing trickier still. You're as well to just give up the point

Developer Camelot
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now



SWING AND A MISS
A separate motion-controlled game type lets you use a single Joy-Con, held upright, to play, with your character moving automatically so you can focus on your swing. On paper, it sounds great: *Wii Sports'* tennis with more precise controls. But it takes time to get used to, with small movements sometimes interpreted as attempted shots. While you can pull off lobs and drop shots with practice, that's hardly ideal for the casual play sessions for which the mode has clearly been designed.





TIME EXTEND

Rogue Legacy

The Roguelike that revelled in breaking every rule in the book

By Alex Spencer

Developer/publisher Cellar Door Games **Format** PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One **Release** 2013

The title is a little misleading. Legacy is certainly at the core of this game, but it's not the legacy of *Rogue*, the 1980s dungeon crawler which spawned an entire genre, with which developer Cellar Door is most concerned. *Rogue Legacy* does use the rough shape of the Roguelike – procedurally generated levels, permadeath that means starting afresh after every playthrough – but from there, it proceeds to gleefully break the rules at almost every turn.

Instead, the legacy in question here is your own, as the player. Every time a character dies, the adventure is passed along to one of their descendants, a concept that's been recently revisited and applied to a *Zelda*-like formula in Onebitbeyond's *The Swords Of Ditto*. It's a great way of making diegetic sense of the 'game over' – an individual character might die but the player, as an external force, sticks around – but it also fundamentally changes the way *Rogue Legacy* is played.

At the start of each new run, you're given a choice of three potential heirs, divided up into standard character classes – Paladin, Mage and Barbarian, for instance. The real fun, though, is in the handful of defining traits assigned to each character. These can be merely cosmetic, like Baldness, or game-altering, like Dwarfism, which makes you harder to hit and opens up access to hidden tunnels threaded through the game's dungeons. But mostly? They're just silly.

Take Alektorophobia, for example – the fear of chickens. In *Rogue Legacy*, it causes the game's health-regenerating poultry snacks to appear as a sprinting headless chicken. Or Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which means your character leaves a gaseous trail behind them as they bounce through the levels.

These help to give each new character a sense of unique personality. Between classes and traits – and the single spell each is equipped with – the variety is nearly limitless. You'll rarely see a character with the exact same strengths, weaknesses and quirks twice. It can also have a huge impact on the way you approach a particular run.

An endomorphic Barbarian King, too heavy to be pushed back by enemy attacks, can charge into combat unfazed. Meanwhile, a clumsy Miner – who gets a boost to the amount of gold they collect at the expense of their stats, and will accidentally smash every breakable object they touch like a coin-filled piñata – is a great way of hoovering up currency, but they're so brittle that you will have to dodge most fights.

Picking a new heir essentially takes the build randomisation normally seen in Roguelikes, where each playthrough slowly establishes a new character archetype based on what you find in the world, and frontloads it. This can be dispiriting if you're presented with a litter of runts, but there's always an incentive to press on regardless.

Because it's not only the adventure, or hereditary disorders, that these heroes pick up from their predecessors. And it's at this point that *Rogue Legacy* really breaks from its genre's tradition.

Each new game begins with you inheriting all of the gold picked up on the previous playthrough, to be spent on upgrades. There are two stores, where you can buy armour and abilities based on blueprints and runes found in the levels, and a standard skill tree. The latter is neatly depicted as a castle under construction, where each new skill you buy – whether it's permanently increasing your health or attack values, or unlocking a whole new character class – adds a new tower or parapet to your fortress.

These upgrades can change the game significantly. You start the game with a fairly sluggish avatar, but buying the right runes adds a double jump, a speedy dash or even a few seconds of flight. These runes can be stacked on top of one another, meaning you can actually have anything up to a quintuple jump, at the expense of other abilities.

This is vitally important, because the actual moment-to-moment gameplay of *Rogue Legacy* is primarily about agility. There are spikes and other obstacles which often require double jumps or dashes to navigate safely. Even in combat, sword-slashing is secondary to dodging the barrage of attacks that enemies throw your way. As fireballs, ice shards and poisonous ▶

bubbles criss-cross the screen, it becomes apparent that there's a bullet-hell shooter somewhere in *Rogue Legacy*'s family tree. (That one uncle you were always a bit scared of, perhaps.)

This persistence between runs is the aspect of *Rogue Legacy* which has attracted the most criticism. The game isn't as interested in protecting the purity of the Roguelike lineage as its title might suggest, which put off a lot of hardcore fans of the genre. Games which stray too far from the path laid out by the original *Rogue* are referred to in some quarters as 'Roguelike-likes'. With its persistent unlocks, which bend the concept of permadeath almost to breaking point, *Legacy* might be best categorised as a 'Roguelike-like-like'.

It's worth noting that death does still have definite meaning in *Legacy*, due to a hard limit on its inheritance mechanics. Waiting at the door of each newly-generated dungeon is Charon, ferryman of Hades turned taxman. He confiscates any gold that hasn't already been spent, meaning you can't grind and slowly stack up your fortune, life after life.

Criticising *Legacy* for being the black sheep of the genre family misses the point. This is a game which takes pleasure in subverting the tight conventions of the genre – including one of its most cardinal rules. It's possible to stop the game generating a new level layout, and instead replay the one you just died in.

Like everything in *Rogue Legacy*, this option comes at a cost. You only get to keep 60% of the loot picked up on this second run, and any chests you found last time are left empty. But it can be a useful way of quickly reattempting one of the game's set-piece rooms, such as the Fairy Chests, which lock away an upgrade rune behind an individually crafted puzzle or challenge. These might ask you to traverse a trap-filled room without taking any damage, or without ever using a jump. Say the challenge is reaching a distant chest in five seconds, and your current lumbering hero doesn't stand a chance. If you roll a speedy Shinobi next time, you can make your way back to that room and zip over with several seconds to spare.

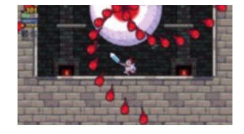


While the layout of *Rogue Legacy*'s dungeon is randomly generated, each room is individually prefabricated, enabling Cellar Door to craft mini-puzzles and surprises

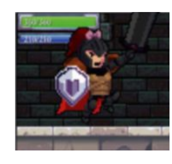
THE GAME IS SO DEDICATED TO THE PLEASURE OF SUBVERSION THAT IT EVEN BREAKS ITS OWN RULES

This might sound a little like cheating, but Cellar Door's aim with *Rogue Legacy* was to make Roguelikes more accessible, by reducing randomness and repetition. Nowhere is that more obvious than in how the game handles its bosses. You're explicitly encouraged to lock in a layout to practise fighting them, and the ability to quick travel straight from the front door to any boss you encountered last time means there's no need to fight your way there all over again. And crucially, you only need to beat each boss once to access the endgame.

The game is so dedicated to the pleasure of subversion that it even breaks its own rules. Buy the right upgrade and you can eventually negotiate with Charon, allowing

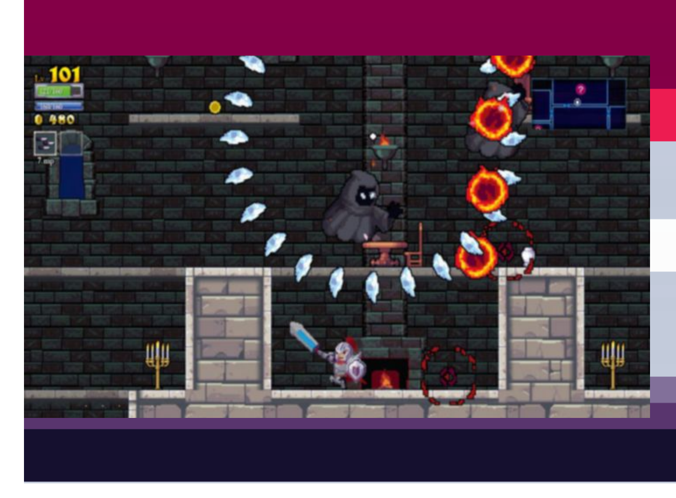


Four bosses, each overseeing a different section of dungeon, must be defeated to unlock the game's final challenge



HEREDITARY WRONGS

While the conditions each character's congenital traits are named after are often serious, in execution they're anything but. Stereo Blindness emulates an inability to see in three dimensions by making everything a flat sprite. Peripheral Arterial Disease means that a hero will have no circulation in their feet, so they don't set off motion-detecting spike traps. Prosopagnosia – or face blindness – removes all information about your heirs when you pick them. Cellar Door often prioritises an idea or gag over the practicality of a trait. While Nostalgia's sepia-tone makes for an amusingly different experience, for example, Vertigo – which flips the entire screen upside-down – is nearly unplayable. But these are much rarer, and it's worth it for the first time you happen upon a new trait.



All classes have the same basic attack, but the key to *Rogue Legacy*'s combat isn't attacking but dodging – which, as multiple enemies fire projectiles your way, can become very tricky

you to hold on to a portion of your unspent gold, passing it along to the next generation along with any picked up on this run.

Some of the pleasures familiar to dedicated Roguelike players are definitely present in *Rogue Legacy* – such as the essentially infinite supply of stages with which you can get familiar, but never learn by heart. It's just that, like the walls of a procedurally-generated dungeon, here the priorities are shifted.

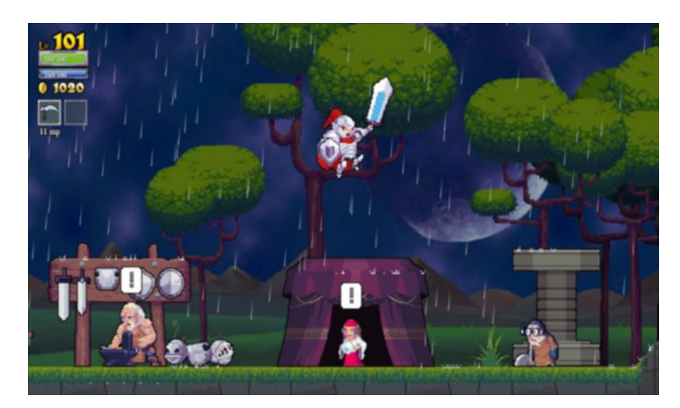
In a traditional Roguelike, the aim is to gain knowledge and skills until you're capable of making it all the way through its dungeons in a single run. That can be frustrating, especially if your undoing comes down to a random hiccup – a vital item that never appears, a particularly harsh level – and doubly if it comes deep into a run. But it also creates a unique tension.

In *Legacy*, the goal of most runs is smaller: gathering enough to buy that one expensive upgrade you've had your eye on for ages. As the gold stacks up, that familiar tension emerges, in a slightly different form – can you make it to one more chest before dying? Successfully passing the required threshold is exhilarating, and while you can continue to push your luck afterwards, death often feels like a release.

This is really the moment at which *Legacy* diverges from genre tradition, where death might be a fair result of your mistakes but is certainly never welcome. It's instructive about what actually makes *Rogue Legacy* so satisfying. A surprising amount of the game exists outside of the dungeons you run, jump, hack and slash your way through. It's almost a management game, of picking the bills in advance and then seeing if you've got the skills to pay them.

This creates one of the most compelling 'one more go' loops in all of videogames. It's a small thing on the surface, but the order in which you make decisions after a game over is defining. First you pick your next character, then get to spend the money on your last run, before eventually testing out any new abilities you bought. *Rogue Legacy* takes familiar progression systems that have grown stale from their over-use, and makes them feel fresh again through careful cross-breeding. The resulting loop might have nothing to do with the games that inspired it, but it's perhaps fitting: at some point, you've got to create your own legacy. ■

The grounds outside the castle are surprisingly busy, with a Blacksmith, Enchantress and Architect flogging their wares to passing adventurers



A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Milan, Paris) **Format** Switch **Release** 2017

With so much attention paid to that stunning announcement at E3 2017 – when Shigeru Miyamoto walked onto Ubisoft's stage and reduced *Kingdom Battle* creative director Davide Soliani to tears – it's easy to forget about the game that caused it. Yes, the story is fascinating, one of Nintendo releasing its most treasured possession into the hands of a partner and rival. But so is the game that resulted from it.

Mario and pals are, it turns out, ideal candidates for a riff on *XCOM*. Cast members fit well into class archetypes, given powers appropriate to each character. The overwatch-like Hero Sight is perfect for Mario, likewise Peach's Healing Jump. Yes, a few liberties are taken here and there, as is made rather clear by Mario holding a gun for the first time ever on the game's box. Luigi's remote sentries aren't exactly canon either. But it all feels oddly natural, as if these characters were made specifically for a strategy game.

While this was a game born from unexpected freedom, it thrives on its limitations. Team-building restrictions, for instance, insist that your party of three is always lead by Mario and contains at least one Rabbid. At first that feels limiting – and like a decision made first and foremost to ensure Ubisoft's punchable creations aren't simply ignored. But the system forces you to make tough decisions according to the task at hand, rather than playing favourites.

Since release, *Kingdom Battle* has expanded slowly. A suite of challenge levels ramp up the difficulty to an often absurd extent; one chucks every boss and midboss in the game onto a giant map and insists you kill them all within a set number of turns.

It's not a difficulty curve so much as a cliff; we'd hoped for rather more, if we're honest. And then we got it. The newly launched Donkey Kong Adventure expansion is lavish, lengthy and brilliantly subverts the base game's mechanics; it is, in essence, a case study in how to make DLC. You enter battle as Donkey Kong and, as usual, your first order of business is to run to cover. He picks it up and chucks it at an enemy. He can fling allies, too, greatly extending your team's mobility compared to the base game. It's delightful stuff, a perfect way of bringing down the curtain on a game that seemed inconceivable until the moment it was announced, and turned out an unremitting joy. ■

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EDGE 25TH ANNIVERSARY

